Hyouketsu Kyoukai no Eden Volume 6

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Illustrations in Volume 6:

細音啓
●さざねけい

『黄昏色の詠使い　イヴは夜明けに微笑んで』で第18回ファンタジア長編小説大賞佳作を受賞。同作でデビュー。東京に限りなく近い神奈川の端っこでこっそり生息する兼業作家。近況――朝二時半に起きる超朝型生活、続いてます。しかし昨年6月くらいに始めたは良いものの……冬の朝は寒い、寒すぎる！　そろそろ心が折れるかも!?

イラスト：カスカベアキラ
カバーデザイン：カマベヨシヒコ（ZEN）

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水晶世界
氷結鏡界のエデン6

細音啓

ファンタジア文庫

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富士見書房

氷結鏡界のエデン6
水晶世界

「弱く役立たずの巫女が、希望を与えるような言葉を口にするな」
冷たく響くホルンの声に、決意を持ってユミィは答えた。
「もし、私が負けたら――あなたの言う通り巫女を辞めます」
浄化の巫女・ユミィの存在を否定する千年獅・ホルンが、天結宮に帰還した。シェルティスは、ホルンとの軋轢に苦しむユミィの支えになりたいと願う。しかし、彼もまた一通の怪文書で窮地に陥る。
即ち――「護士の中に人の形をした幽幻種が潜んでいる」。
緊迫した状況の中、強力な幽幻種まで出現。討伐に向かうホルンは、ユミィにある〝賭け〟を持ちかけるのだが……!?
〝強さ〟と〝弱さ〟の意味を問われる、重層世界ファンタジー。

ファンタジア文庫
細音啓作品集

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黄昏色の詠使いII 奏でる少女の道行きは
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黄昏色の詠使いIV 踊る世界、イヴの調律
黄昏色の詠使いV 全ての歌を夢見る子供たち
黄昏色の詠使いVI そしてシャオの福音来たり
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氷結鏡界のエデン2 禁断水晶
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「たったひとりの子供も救えない巫女など
私は認めない」

氷結鏡界のエデン

6 水晶世界

「私の沁力で伝えます……
絶対に伝えます」

「ユミィという巫女は……すごく強い。
僕より、あなたより、
誰より強い気持ちを持っている」

「弱い巫女が、叶えられない夢を……
希望を軽々しく口にするな」

「私の沁力（しんりょく）で伝えます……
絶対に伝えます」

「ユミィという巫女は……すごく強い。
僕より、あなたより、
誰より強い気持ちを持っている」

「弱い巫女が、叶えられない夢を……
希望を軽々しく口にするな」

『わたしの声を聞くものよ。
あなたは、ようやく目覚めることができる。

この凍(い)てついた眠れる世界で、
あなたは自分の足で歩くことができるようになるの』

『さあ、生まれ落ちた子よ』

『世界があなたを望むのならば、
あなたに大いなる詠(うた)を教えてあげる』

氷結鏡界のエデン6

水晶世界

細音啓

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氷結鏡界のエデン6
水晶世界
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皇妃を頂点とした天結宮の5人の巫女たち

浮遊大陸を守護する沁力結界は、皇妃サラを頂点とした５人の巫女たちが維持している。
大陸の女神にもたとえられる彼女たちには、それぞれ千年獅と呼ばれる専属護衛がつき、
彼女たちの心身の安全を守っている

皇姫サラ

沁力による
氷結鏡界を
司る存在

千年獅の専属護衛

主天

皇妃の専属護衛。
公の階級だが、その位についている
人物の実在は、確認されていない

巫女の第1位

エルミーティア・遊・ラスカ

千年獅の第1位

ファルヴァレン・シーケンサー

巫女の第2位

メイメル・イン・カーネイション

結界系の沁力を
得意とする、
ユミィの先輩巫女

千年獅の第2位

爛

拳闘士。
千年獅との組み手が趣味

巫女の第3位

ヴィオラ・ノヴァ

千年獅の第3位

ホルン・ノヴァ

巫女の第4位

春蕾・ピア・ヌクレネン

領域系の沁力を
得意とする、
か弱き少女

千年獅の第4位

レオン・ネストリウス・オーヴァ

シェルティスの
旧友である大剣使い

巫女の5位

ユミィ・エル・スフレニクトール
Ymy Ele Soufflenictole

洗礼系の沁力を得意とする
優しい少女。シェルティスの
幼なじみであり、
現在は専属護衛をもたない

必ずたどり着く。
――君の待つ場所へ。

Story & Characters

【あらすじ&登場人物紹介】

幽幻種と呼ばれる存在に侵攻を受ける世界。巫女の祈る守護結界に守られた浮遊大陸オービエ・クレアでのみ、人は生きることができた。
大陸の外――穢歌の庭(エデン)に堕ち、禁断の呪力・魔笛を宿したシェルティス。彼は秘密を抱え、幼なじみの巫女・ユミィの専属護衛・千年獅を目指していた。
浮遊大陸の政治を司る統政庁で、シェルティスは秘宝・『ミクヴァの緋眼』と接触。その過程で、天結宮(ソフィア)でも統政庁でもない第三勢力『異篇卿』と交戦状態になる。どうやら『異篇卿』の目的は天結宮と統政庁の間に亀裂を生むことだったらしいのだが――

異端の少年／護士候補生

シェルティス・マグナ・イール
Sheltis Magna Yehle

双剣使いの少年。
穢歌の庭に落下したことで、
禁断の呪力・魔笛(まてき)を
その身に宿した

Prologue – Return

Without even a name, deep within the sea of trees——

Large trees stood as if to prevent one's path.

Their moss-covered trunks were solid like boulders and their tops were hidden by the leaves so they couldn't be seen no matter how much one looked up.

……Plop.

A droplet fell off the edge of the bluish leaves. The drop of water that fell from far overhead——

"Cold!"

It fell on the brow of the woman walking directly below with a splash.

"Are you okay, ane-ue?"

"Yes……I was just a little surprised."

The woman of small build took out a handkerchief and wiped her wet brow. She was wearing a cloak-like vestment but that was also hit by droplets and becoming moist.

"……Haa. It's such a problem walking through the forest after it rains. My shoes are also mud-stained."

"That's because it was a squall. It was fortuitous that we could avoid the rain in the shadow of a large tree."

The Guard that called the petite woman "ane-ue" accompanied her to the side. She was a woman but was tall enough for a man with a massive rifle shining dark grey on her back.

And most eye-catching —— she wore a blinder over both eyes.

"Shall we rest?"

"We mustn't, Horn. Patrolling the floating Orbie Clar continent is also a Priestess' job……well, even with that said,"

The petite woman in a cloak slackened her expression with a giggle.

"It can't be helped even if I put up a front. The truth is I'm a little tired. Let's patrol for another thirty minutes and then head back to the campgrounds."

"——Roger."

There was no appearance of weariness on the Guard named Horn. She was shouldering the rifle which should have been considerably heavy and she also had heavy pistols at each shoulder.

And the blinder covering both eyes.

Her vision should have been perfectly reduced to zero but that Guard was walking on the rain-dampened ground carelessly. She avoided the roots sticking out of the ground and the branches sticking out above.

——A bizarre scene.

For a person who knew where this sea of trees was, it would be clearer than seeing a fire just how reckless it was to walk through it with a blinder covering one's eyes .

The Biotope.

It was an savage land that made up the edges of the floating continent, Orbie Clar. Undiscovered lifeforms and ecosystems were a given and there were large carnivores starting with dragons.

……A mysterious lifeform's call came from somewhere.

It was unknown whether it was a bug, a bird or some beast. A multitude of calls from lifeforms were coming from within the great sea of trees and from outside it.

"Ane-ue, we've walked a considerable distance so shouldn't you rehydrate?"

"It's just a little more so I'll bear it. Rather than drinking our canister's water here, it'd taste better to have tea at the campgrounds."

"Understood."

——However, fear of the Biotope could not be seen from the two.

It was like they were walking through their own garden.

Excessive fear would cramp the body while excessive caution would invite doubt. That excessive fear and caution was the cause of fatal danger in the Biotope. It was precisely because they knew that.

"……"

"Ane-ue?"

The petite Priestess twitched for a moment and stopped moving. The Guard who noticed that instantly also came to a stop.

"Clairvoyance? Did you see something?"

"……No, it was telepathy. It was from the second Priestess, Meimel-san. She asked, '*Can you come back?*'"

The Priestess smiled and shook her head.

"It's a matter of '*We'd like you to help out with the business in the tower for the Priestess that we're sending as a special envoy to the Governmental Sector.*'"

"……If it's from the patrolling groups, I think it would be better to speak with the first Priestess."

"That's true. But it's Meimel-san we're talking about here so there's probably some deep thought behind it. At any rate, it's an important matter so we can't refuse."

Right? —— the Priestess winked, to which the Guard made no response.

"……"

"What is it?"

"Nothing. I was just thinking about which Priestess was going to the Governmental Sector."

The tall woman responded after a short while.

"It seems to be Ymy-san. Meimel-san is in charge of managing the tower in place of the Queen-sama and Syun-rei-san is……bashful so it would be difficult to negotiate with the Governmental Sector. It's Ymy-san by process of elimination."

"……That sounds right."

The Guard mixed a deep, deep sigh with her muddled words.

"Then let's hurry back to the campgrounds. We're going, Horn."

"……Roger."

The Priestess she was guarding turned around.

While staring at her back——

"Ymy……Ymy Ele Soufflenictole is going to the Governmental Sector?"

The blinder-wearing gun user.

The third Sennenshi faced the empty sky and whispered in an extremely tiny voice.

"You……a Priestess who can't even save a single child is representing Tenketsu Palace?"

Sophia

Chapter 1: and

HornBrass Musical InstrumentViolaStringed Instrum

Part 1

"……"

Mushrooms were piled up in a mountain on the cutting board.

From pure white mushrooms as thin as string, to bright red mushrooms that looked as solid as stone, spotted poisonous mushrooms that were uncannily moving and mushrooms that were currently in a balloon state and spouting spores.

"……Muu."

Sheltis glared down at that ominous mountain of mushrooms.

He had reddish brown frizzy hair, looks with some cherubic and impish qualities still present and a slimness that couldn't quite be called slender.

"Which ones are poisonous and which ones are edible ……"

He had taken off his favorite black jacket, and was wearing a striped apron over his shirt.

As for why he was sporting such an appearance, it was because he was currently in the kitchen. But even if he was in the kitchen, it didn't mean that he'd be left with cooking duties and what he'd been handed was a guidebook instead of a knife.

"……I can't see anything except poisonous mushrooms though."

With the book labeled '*Mushroom Encyclopedia*' on its spine in one hand, he compared the images on the pages to the mushrooms on the cutting board.

For example, this spotted poisonous mushroom. The uncanny movement was a feature but this was written for it in the '*Mushroom Encyclopedia*'.

'*Compound color spotted poisonous shimeji*

The red and yellow flecks are its trait. It moves about once every three seconds and you can see that this is a reaction to releasing spores. Do you understand?

Anyway, don't eat this unless you're reckless; actually, don't even touch it. It's a potent poisonous mushroom that will keep you from leaving the toilet for a week with bouts of vomiting and diarrhea. If you're unlucky, your kidneys and liver will fail and you'll die.'

"……For the time being, that means this one can't be eaten."

It was written not to touch it so the poison might be transferred from the skin too. He timidly tried to move it off the cutting board with the edge of the knife——

"Ah, wait, Sheltis. I think it's this one. The one on the left page."

Machine Ilis crystal which was at the end of the pendant hanging at his chest was blinking.

"This?"

"Yes, if it's that one, then it's edible. Why not consider it?"

"Compound color spotted pseudo-shimeji

The red and yellow flecks are its trait. For movements, it moves about once every four seconds and doesn't have spores. (It's a pain so look at the right page.)

Unlike the mushroom on the right page, this one is edible, so you can boil or fry it or whatever you like. The difference with the poisonous mushroom to the right is in the movements. That one moves once every three seconds and this one moves once every four seconds. Distinguish that. ……Well, sometimes that one takes four seconds and this one takes three seconds, so just think of it as having bad luck and give up if that happens. You'll be fine if you're normally a good person. Pray. I also ingested poison because of this once."

"How am I supposed to tell!?"

"No, look, it says if you're normally a good person then you' ll be fine even if you eat it——"

"No, no, no! Isn't this guidebook completely worthless !? Rather, isn't this sentence here non-explanatory? '*Pray, I also ingested poison because of this once*', isn't this irresponsible!? Who's the author……Va……iel?"

He had to be seeing things. The name of the author on the guidebook was the same as the name of a man who belonged to the same unit.

……Come to think of it, Vaiel did seem to specialize in cooking.

Putting aside the two women of marriageable age, Monica and Kagura, he was the only one who could cook actually cook in their unit.

"Nah, it couldn't be."

Author introduction.

He became a best seller when he published an explanatory book on "Men's Cooking" borne of living alone most of the time. Though sharp-tongued, his thorough and heated explanations are supported by an

wide variety of readers. ……Lately, he was scouted by a unit of three kids in his main occupation as a Guard. What a paiiin.

"It's Vaiel!?"

"*Isn't that great; if it's someone you know then we can trust what's written. As expected of the unit's head chef.*"

"I wonder about that……"

As I thought, let's avoid dangerous things. From the pile of mushrooms, he took the thin white mushroom and looked at the guidebook again. And——

"Hey, Sheltis, did you call me just now?"

The woman chopping rhythmically in the center of the kitchen looked over.

It was the store owner of the open-air cafe, '*Albireo*', located in the Second Living District. She was still young ……most likely, she was in her early twenties yet managing this shop, and she was normal for her to be known as head chef in the store.

"Nope, not you, head chef. A different person."

"Oh my, is that so? By the way, are you done with the preparations for the mushroom nabe I left you with?"

"Mm—, I'm still selecting the mushrooms."

"My, my, it can't be helped. Then I'll handle this. You look after the nabe over there. Add some water if it looks like it's about to boil over."

"Okay, okay. ……This is how it's like when I come back after a while."

It's almost been a full two months.

Just when he thought he'd returned to the place he'd lived and worked at until he re-entered Tenketsu Palace, she hadn't said "welcome back" or "it's been a while" and instead bluntly went "help with the cooking preparations".

Sophia

"It's exactly because it's been a while."

She smiled spinning her knife skillfully.

"But it was great timing. I went hunting for mushrooms on the last holiday but because I took anything I could find, it's hard to tell which ones are poisonous. If you hadn't come, it would've been too much work so I would've just boiled it all and served it to the customers."

"You're brimming with the intent to kill with poison!? "

"It's fine. I'd hire somebody to taste test for poison before that……about ten healthy ones."

"It's not fine at all: it'd be terrible for those people!"

……Ahh, I'm glad it was stopped before victims appeared.

……Actually, I don't think this is something that would normally be considered at an open-air cafe.

"But there's a ton. Did you gather these all by yourself ?"

"Of course I went with Eyriey. We rode on her three-wheeled vehicle to the Biotope."

"The Biotope? Eh, but that place"

The floating continent Orbie Clar could be largely split into three areas.

First, in the middle were the Living Districts that people inhabited.

On the outside of that was the Nature District. This area had nature preserved and was comparatively safe.

Further beyond that lay the Biotope —— it was a savage land with vast nature that hadn't been touched by humans and which extended to the edges of the floating continent Orbie Clar. The chances of encountering wild dragons and large carnivores and, above all, Yuugenshu was high in this area.

"There are swarms of wild carnivores……"

"Yes, it's been a long time since I enjoyed such a full-out thrill. An earth dragon, a fire-breathing bird and a ten metre-long super poisonous centipede. I recalled the past without trying to."

"Head chef, who are you?"

"You sure say some strange things; aren't I just the owner of an open-air cafe?"

Chop, chop chop chop chop chop. She precisely sliced the vegetables thinly with the knife in a reversed grip.

……It's strange when she holds the knife in reverse. It's exactly like when I hold my dual blades.

"Ah, and Sheltis. Was Meimel doing well?"

"Meimel?"

"Yes, there should be a Priestess in Tenketsu Palace by that name. You're a Guard of Tenketsu Palace so I was wondering if you already met her. Come now, it's that Priestess that loves to tease. No matter how busy she is, she'll drink a day's worth of vegetable juice and won't go without an hour of calisthenics."

"I've met her but……wait, wh-what's with that suggestive information! Hey, why does an open-air cafe shopkeeper know about a Priestess' private life!?"

"Eh? This is obvious——"

The head chef said up to there and then shut her mouth and crossed her arms in thought.

"……Let's talk about this some other day."

"Uwaa, suddenly acting like it's none of my business!"

The second Priestess, Meimel, and the head chef.

……I'm curious but also kind of scared to find out.

He wanted to know but would avoid getting in deep. Somehow feeling something cold down his back, Sheltis gave up on pursuing the matter further.

"By the way, where's Eyriey who went to the Biotope with you?"

"She's shopping at a market on the outskirts. But she's late. It's been an hour since I asked her so it wouldn't be strange for her to return any minute now."

The head chef frowned with a puzzled expression.

"Maybe she's loitering around again."

"No—pe, I wasn't. There was just an unusual arrest so I went to take a look."

The shop's back door opened slowly revealing a girl holding paper bags with both arms.

"I'm back! Oh, Sheltis, you should've said you were coming back ahead of time. You were in the Governmental Sector until the day before yesterday, right?"

Eyriey put the paper bags down on the kitchen counter .

She had unkempt orange hair and not a shred of make-up. Her favorite clothes were oil-stained overalls which had none of the showiness of a sixteen year old.

"Yeah, we put together the report after returning yesterday and finally got to take a break this morning. That's why I wondered if I could go outside during that time. There's another meeting in the evening though."

"Heh—, a meeting? Then maybe Yuto and I will come play too."

"……I wonder how the topic just now made you think of coming to play."

"We'll wait patiently in your room while you're at the meeting. Let's play after the meeting ends? Okay? Yuto also said she wanted to visit Shel-nii."

"If I get the time then."

"'Kay—! Then let's finish today's job in a flash. It's just inspecting the errand bike's engine so it should take just a few minutes——"

"Would you wait, Eyriey?"

The head chef quickly caught by the neck the girl who was about to run out the back door again.

"It's fine if you're going to do your job but isn't there something to report before that? It looks like your shopping took a while. What's this you were saying about looking at something?"

"Ah, I was interested in that too."

An unusual arrest she'd said, but what did that mean?

"Right, right, I thought you'd say that."

Eyriey tapped her fist to her palm while still being held by the neck.

"At the plaza a little while ago, I saw a purse snatching . The thief aimed for an elderly's purse and ran away after snatching it."

"Oh my, that's unusual. A thievery."

While looking sideways over at how the boiling nabe was doing, the head chef rolled her eyes in surprise.

Although a light crime, it was rare for thievery like that to happen in the Living Districts where public order was good. There were reporting devices installed in places and everyone knew that the criminal's face would show up plain as day on the observation cameras.

"Since it was an arrest, of course it was a security officer who caught him."

"I saw a stranger scene than that, head chef!"

Eyriey clenched her fist with an excited tone of voice.

"The criminal who stole a purse at the plaza and ran away! Ahh, what is the fate of the obaa-san's purse!? —— or so I thought, then an onee-san came from the intersection on the other side with a huge rifle and when I was wondering what she'd do, she pointed the gun at the criminal and '*bang!*'."

"She shot?"

"It was a rubber bullet for suppression though. Yeahhh, it was surprising. Since the security officers in town carry stun guns, right? She had such a heavy rifle! Her outfit wasn't the blue one security officers wear either, but some kind of dark camouflage suit."

"*Eyriey, I have a feeling that wasn't a security officer. According to my information, rifles aren't on the list of large guns carried by security officers.*"

"Ah, so it really isn't? But it was amazing! That onee-san held that rifle in one hand and shot the criminal from within the midday crowd in the plaza. Even though she'd hit a civilian if she missed……she really nailed him."

"Of course she would. I think she'd hit him even if she shot a hundred times."

"*She'd hit him.*"

"Yeah? Sheltis and Ilis, what's up, you know her?"

"Eyriey, that was probably a Guard and not a security officer. And a ridiculously famous one."

Exceptional physical strength that made it possible to one-hand a two-handed rifle. That and the courage to shoot within a crowd without hesitation were the makings of a sniper.

Above all else――

"*Say, Eyriey, was that woman wearing a strange blindfold?*"

"She was, she was! Shooting a rifle with both eyes covered, that's so amazing!……so who is that person?"

……The sniper with a blinder.

……So she has returned to Tenketsu[Sophia] Palace.

"I think even you've heard at least her name. Come on, think of who would be the most famous sisters on the floating continent (Orbie Clar)."

"*Horn Nova —— she is the little sister of the third Priestess, Viola Nova, and holds the position of the third Sennenshi, Ex Machina. She is the representative master shooter of the floating continent (Orbie Clar) and the user of the* 'Magic Bullet'."

Part 2

Tenketsu (Sophia) Palace aboveground, the gate restricted to personnel.

"It's rare for somebody to go outside."

In the seat for security that would check badges should be sitting, a person he knew was sitting there for some reason.

"……Kagura as well, what are you doing?"

"Receptionist parttime work. Come on, show me your badge."

The girl with the machine helmet worn low over her eyes replied nonchalantly. She was a Cadet Guard in the same unit as Sheltis and computer specialist at the same time.

"This parttime job fits my preferences; to be able to do my hobby and make money at the same time is a dream job."

"Umm, you mean observing people?"

"That's almost correct. I'm taking a sample of when people enter or exit the tower. It's interesting obtaining the movement patterns of unexpected people."

Kagura was of the demi-human race, the '*Nell people*'. Their special trait was the ears that poked out on the sides, they were inherently strong in the fields of mathematics and statistics and were also very wary. Kagura's hobby of observing people was probably also derived from that.

"By the way, did you go out to the Two Swans[Albireo]?"

"You know it?"

"It's where my rival works so it's obviously within the realm of expectation."

She nodded smoothly.

"But you came at a good time; the unit captain was looking for you. Even though there's a meeting in the evening, you were nowhere to be found. Vaiel's cooped up in his room so we were wondering just what the men in our group were doing――"

"Vaiel's in his room? That's rare."

It was his daily routine to be hard at work having a nap on the bench at the training grounds.

"Yes, he said he was busy writing something. '*After mushrooms……maybe wild grasses?*' he said, though I don't know what it means."

"……It's coming, the continuation of the '*Mushroom Encyclopedia*'."

"Do you know something about it?"

"Nope. Rather than that, the meeting's pretty soon so aren't you going to have a problem doing your parttime job here――"

"No need to worry. ……4…….3…….2……1……okay, now my parttime job is done."

Kagura jumped off the security chair.

Looking sidelong at her standing beside him, Sheltis turned towards the tower gates.

"I wonder if today's meeting will take long."

"……The topic being what it is, I wonder."

Still facing straight forward, she shrugged a little.

The Governmental Sector which was based in the floating archipelago (Lagoon) which lay far from the floating continent, Orbie Clar.

Having gone on an expeditionary mission there as an escort, they'd only returned to the floating continent (Orbie Clar) the day before yesterday. They'd taken the entirety of yesterday to put together the report for that and today was the meeting about that report.

"Apparently our personal reports will go first and Cadres Guard Ishtar will make a final summary report. That's what today's hearing is for. After that, they'll confirm our information on '*them*' whom we confronted. It looks like Priestess Ymy will also be attending."

Maha
Golden.

Igun-I
Blank.

The third organization that those two they'd met with belonged to.

"It's just that important of a matter."

It definitely wouldn't be a short meeting.

The meeting would……no, the response for beyond that would take long.

"The meeting room is on floor 268. I think Cadres Guard Ishtar is waiting, so let's go."

Whispering that like a monologue, the machine helmet-wearing girl tightened her lips.

Part 3

"Ummm, then I'll continue Kagura-san's report. I wonder if Kagura-san's report is really basic? You might have written too much plain fact and lack your own considerations. The complete opposite of Vaiel-kun's report—"

At the seat of honor for the table in the meeting room, the golden-haired woman with a report in one hand shifted her knees.

Cadres Guard Ishtar. She was a spear user who had went on the expedition to the Governmental Sector as the Priestess' escort.

"Now then, Monica-san's is……yup, well written! It's really fitting for the unit leader!"

"I-I'm honored!"

Sitting in the seat opposite Ishtar, Monica bowed many times in embarrassment.

She was dazzling with her light sakura-colored long hair and looks. She had once studied shinryoku spells as an apprentice Priestess but she was now the wielder of the crossed rods who led Sheltis' unit.
Rosario

"Okay, then that's the end of the mandatory hearing. Ah— so tireeed. I wanna see I'sa-chan's faceee. I haven't seen her for five hours now."

Ishtar sighed after closing the file with the reports.

"……Then shall we enter the topic that everybody's been waiting for? That pair of two."

The meeting room became silent again.

Monica and Kagura's shoulders stiffened at the same time and even Vaiel who'd been resting his head on his hands looked up with a tiresome expression.

"There was a pair of two that attacked the Governmental Sector's office building head-on during the last day of the conference. It's pretty much exactly how it was written in everybody's reports. It actually became a big fight so that's a given though."

That's right.

This was a report meeting in name but this was today's true topic —— the summarizing of information related to the mysterious two who had attacked the Governmental Sector.

"Just Golden (Maha) and Blank (Igun-I)? The organization those two belong to is still unknown. It looks like the chances of there being a third organization unrelated to the Governmental Sector really is high……and what Ishtar wants to ask is this next part. Ishtar fought Golden (Maha) and Monica-san's group fought Golden's (Maha) clones. After that……"

"Is it about me?"

Being pierced with Ishtar's deeply meaningful gaze, Sheltis corrected his posture.

"Yup, yup. You chased after Blank (Igun-I). It's fine no matter how small the detail. Could you tell us any hint, conversation or some kind of proof that you saw or heard without leaving anything out?"

"Ah, but……"

You first —— being looked at by Ishtar's smiling face, Sheltis lowered his voice and muddled his words.

"Mm? What's up?"

Head propped up on her hands, the Cadres Guard instead urged him for his response with an expression that said she was enjoying this.

"An important person hasn't come to the meeting room."

"Ymy-sama, you mean?"

He wordlessly nodded at Ishtar's reply.

They would have the Priestess also join them and listen in on the matter concerning Golden (Maha) and Blank (Igun-I) that would unfold starting now. Time-wise, it wouldn't be strange for Ymy to have shown up, but she hadn't yet.

"Shall we wait?"

"Mm—. No, we'll receive contact from her when she's coming. Ymy-sama had training until just before this meeting so once she's done with that, she'll meet up with us. Isn't it just that her training's running late?"

The Cadres Guard had a carefree tone.

But.

"……That's odd."

Monica, who'd been silent until then, spoke seriously.

"I'm sure that Ishtar-sama is also aware but Priestess training is extremely harsh. Because it's harsh, strict adherence to the time is basic."

If the training went longer, there was the possibility of causing grave damage to the Priestess' mind and body. That was why there was always an exclusive doctor monitoring the Priestess' condition.

"Ohhh, is that so? Ishtar doesn't really know about those things."

Ishtar raised a brow while still leaning on her hands.

"But you know, Monica-san, if her training isn't running late, then do you have any idea of what else is keeping her?"

"……If you say that, I don't really have any."

"Then it's fine. It's a waste of time so we'll just continue on like this. Ishtar will inform Ymy-sama. It's fine if she makes it before the meeting ends. Are you okay with that too?"

Being looked at head-on, Sheltis was at a loss for words for a moment.

……I have no reason to refuse.

The fifth Priestess, Ymy Ele Soufflenictole —— in reality, Sheltis and she were childhood friends before entering Tenketsu Sophia Palace. However, that was a private secret so he obviously had no intent of asserting it at a public meeting like this.

"It's fine."

"Good decision. Then the continuation —— wait, where'd we stop? I forgot so I'll ask you again."

"Eh?"

"I mean, while Ishtar was fighting Golden[Maha], you chased after Blank[Igun-I]. Did you see or hear anything that would serve as a clue during that time?"

"……Though you said that, that's exactly where the conversation was."

Immediately after Golden[Maha] and Blank[Igun-I] retreated, everybody including Ymy was diagnosed by a doctor starting with the heavily injured Monica. During that time, he'd talked with Ishtar for around an hour and covered all the major points.

The joint struggle with Zeadoll of the Governmental Sector's secret military unit '*Heaven's Wheel*'.

About how the man named Blank[Igun-I] had a completely black appearance, and how he'd activated some kind of power of '*Mikuva's Crimson Eye*' and summoned a Yuugenshu and mechanical weapon.

And the most uncanny thing above all……

"Ahh, that's right, was Blank[Igun-I] somebody you know?"

With Ishtar's words.

He felt all the stares in the room pierce him.

"Umm……I don't know him; he just said that on his own. I feel like I said the same thing when I first reported this though."

"Is that so? Sorry—, Ishtar's memory is bad."

Of course, she probably knew and did that on purpose . With a mocking smile upon her lips, the person herself had no sense of shyness, still propped up on her hands.

"……Sheltis, about what the Cadres Guard said."

"That's the truth. I'll repeat myself: I don't know Blank[Igun-I] ; he just said that stuff on his own."

With Monica double-checking, he shook his head from side to side slowly to convey his answer.

……That's right. I shouldn't know him.

I haven't met him. That should be it but——

"*You know me. Ahh, that's great. I'm really happy.*"

"That's fine. It's fine if you don't know. It's fine if you feel it even if you don't know. Hey, Sheltis, 'Nice to meet you.' *and* 'It's been a while.'. *I've been eagerly waiting the time we would meet in this world."*

The throb I felt at that time……

That —— which made the inside of my chest run wild —— what was that strange unease?

"We can think of it as a diversion."

Kagura said that while holding the machine (Machina) pearl .

"In reality……that thing called the Governmental Sector's treasure, I believe it was, after coming into contact with that, they escaped from the Governmental Sector's territory, right? They might be experienced with those kinds of tactics."

"Moron."

The one who answered faster than anyone else was Vaiel who was suppressing a yawn.

"At that time, that Zea-whatshisface hardened mercenary guy from the Governmental Sector was also there. In that case, there's no point in just causing one side to waver. This is why you're a brat."

"Wha, y-you don't know that!? What made you think that —— hey, are you listening! Hey, listen!?"

Kagura was talking on and on quickly and Vaiel was treating it as bothersome. ……Unexpectedly, Ishtar turned to him with a sigh while looking at those two from the corners of her eyes.

"Well, whatever. Then that means you have no new information?"

"……I'll tell you if there's anything."

"You do that. Then next is Monica-san beside you——"

Ten minutes after that.

With nobody producing any worthwhile information, the meeting came to an end.

"Mm—……no worthwhile information. Well, it can't be helped so let's stop here."

Slipping the folder with the reports under her arm, Ishtar stood up first. Next was Vaiel, Kagura and Monica .

"*Come on, Sheltis.*"

"Ah, yeah."

Being urged by machine Ilis crystal , Sheltis also timidly left the room.

"Ah, that's right."

——Tap.

Ishtar tapped the handle of the long spear she was carrying against the floor while standing in front of the automated door.

"The Lords of Unusual Books."

"……Eh?"

"Ishtar will share one more piece of information with you. When she was fighting at the Governmental Sector, Maha Golden declared that name. He said he was the third of the Lords of Unusual Books. That's probably what they call themselves but what Ishtar wants to tell you is something different from that common name. Have any questions or do you understand?"

If he was the third, then there were at least a second and first.

And they had no idea how many more there were from fourth onwards.

"We don't know how many members there are to the Lords of Unusual Books and we don't know where they're hiding. The chance that they're hiding somebody equal to or stronger than Maha Golden here in Tenketsu Palace Sophia isn't zero either. Taking a stroll around the tower in the middle of the night alone is like asking to be attacked."

Shiver.

Maybe it was the heavy pressure of fear but something unseen filled the room.

"You four have become involved with the Lords of Unusual Books and it's a given to think that they've seen your faces. If they're planning to eliminate the witnesses ――"

If somebody were being targeted ahead of anybody else in Tenketsu Sophia Palace, then the target of the attack would naturally become one of them.

"……Well, I think that possibility's low though."

Ishtar smiled faintly after discerning his nervousness.

"If they were the types to eliminate witnesses, they wouldn't attack the Governmental Sector at high noon. There are like a hundred witnesses in the Governmental Sector too."

……That's true.

At Ishtar's warning, that was the foremost feeling that Sheltis had. But he didn't go as far as to voice it. In any case, the goal and everything else of the Lords of Unusual Books was unknown. They should be more cautious just to be cautious.

"It's better to keep it in mind. You'll become stronger if you don't like being afraid. That's what Ishtar wants to say. See ya～"

The Cadres Guard left with a wink.

"Jeez, that's not appealing at all."

"Agreed."

Vaiel let out a gloomy sigh and strangely, Monica was of the same opinion.

"*It makes you wonder.*"

"About Golden[Maha]?"

"*There's that too but it's something else. Something closer to you.*"

Machine[Ilis] crystal blinked and continued on in a suggestive tone.

"*Ymy never did come in the end.*"

Part 4

Tenketsu (Sophia) Palace, Floor 287.

Continuing down the deserted corridor wrapped in gentle light, just as she was about to reach the intersection.

“Oh my, how rare for you to come to the Priestess’ floor.”

“Hello, Meimel-sama. I’m just looking for someone—”

Being called to by a calm woman’s voice, Ishtar turned around.

Meimel in Carnation —— the second Priestess who specialized in barrier spells. Amongst the women, Ishtar herself ranked in the tall category but the woman before her was also indomitably tall. She had beautiful eyes, dazzling, long jade hair and an impressive vestment like a dress.

“Meimel-sama as well, isn’t your room one floor up?”

"Yes, I had something to talk with Ymy about but, unfortunately, she hasn't returned so I was just heading back."

……Fuun.

……She hasn't returned.

"Why are you here? Or it looks like you were actually looking for Ymy too."

"That's iiit. Ishtar actually had a date planned with Ymy but she was stood up at the last moment. She came to check if she was busy with something else."

"Oh my."

The Priestess folded her arms below her chest and a sigh leaked from her glossy lips.

"What a troubling child. To have immersed herself in training to the point of forgetting the meeting."

"Fumu, fumu, so it really was training. It also became a topic at the meeting but are the Priestesses strict with time when training?"

"Yes. But Ymy's a little problematic. I was consulted by the medical specialist not too long ago. 'Ymy-sama wishes to extend the training but I wonder if it's alright.' "

……Ymy-sama does?

……Now then, I wonder what the circumstances are.

"Has there been anything like this until now?"

"Periodically. Truly a troubling child……even though raising the difficulty of the training will just burden her mind and body. It's worrisome."

"Shall I go stop her training? You have a report for her as well."

"Thanks. But it's fine because I already asked somebody else suited for the job. You'll understand if I say it's the third Priestess."

"Viola-sama, huh. I heard she returned with her little sister, Horn-chan. I think it's been several months since those sisters have come back?"

"Right. But that's――"

The third Priestess.

The Priestess, who could be compared to the first who was on an expedition and the Queen who continued to pray for the barrier, had a rare shadow cloud her expression.

“That really makes Ymy suffer, especially the existence of the Sennenshi, Horn Nova.”

Part 5

……Drip.

A very tiny splash plopped.

The deep blue block of ice that spread as far as the eye could see.

Bluer than the emerald green of the sea at a shoal, more vivid and translucent than the ultramarine of the deep sea. The faint white mixed in was countless bubbles that had been sealed in the ice as they were.

……Drip.

The room of ice that even stagnated the flow of time. Within the room that was so large that its far walls were blurry, the sound of ice water droplets hitting the icy surface echoed.

A world of ice.

Several dozens of degrees below zero, a temperature that would halt an organism's time. No special devices were necessary as the temperature was supported solely by the azure ice filling this room.

"Four hours have elapsed since the establishment of the barrier. Owing to this, the training will now end.

Priestess Ymy Ele Soufflenictole, thank you for your hard work."

The operator's voice came from the broadcasting device attached to the ceiling. The clerk had the qualifications of a doctor and was also well-versed in the operation of the special device used in Priestess training.

……Crish……Pish……Fsh……

The azure ice filling the room cracked.

What began as a crack line gradually grew and went from the surface of the ice to the center —— in an instant, the gigantic azure ice, which was how many thousands of metres across and had incomparable weight, broke apart and scattered.

——Drip.

The puddle on the ground reflected the outline of the girl who was without a stitch of cloth.

"……Fuu."

She spread her hands and took a deep breath. No matter what, she'd just spent forty hours frozen in a state of apparent death. Because even her breathing was

stopped while frozen, she had to consciously breathe at a fixed rhythm like this or she would end up asphyxiated or possibly breathe too much and hyperventilate.

"So……so……so cooooooooooooold!!"

Hugging her dripping wet shoulders, Ymy yelled out.

"C-cold……actually, this hurts!……My body's gonna burst!?"

The barrier of ice constructed with shinryoku. It was fine because her senses were paralyzed while in her state of apparent death but when they returned, the cold would pass the point of being "cold" and attack her as intense pain.

"Haa……ouch!?……"

She bit down on her purple lips over and over and over again.

Her hands that were wrapped around her shoulders had their nails digging into the skin enough to draw blood. She was in a state where she had to do that to bear the agony and spend a little while just breathing.

"Ymy-sama."

"……I'm fine."

Crouched in the puddle of water on the floor, Ymy just barely managed to lift her head.

"Good work. The changing room out the door has been heated and there is hot water prepared in the pot on the table so please take it easy."

"……"

"……Ymy-sama?"

Trepidation entered the operator's voice from the girl's silence.

"It's already been eight hours."

"Eh?"

"It's already been eight hours……let me continue on like this."

The sound of the operator gasping was transmitted through the broadcast device.

"Th-that's……are you insane!"

The operator's reaction was correct. It wasn't *'Are you serious?'*. What Ymy wanted was something that would elicit doubt for her sanity from somebody who knew the harshness of Priestess training.

"You have already extended your training four hours past the regulation thirty six hours. It's already been forty hours total. And you……want to add another eight hours to that!?"

"It's not enough yet."

"Not……not enough――!?"

Ymy stared at the ceiling and nodded in response to the shrill voice of the female operator.

……Yes, it's not enough.

……More and more until my limit. I want to reach more and more into the beyond of the beyond.

"But if you go any further than this, your life or at least your mental health will be in danger."

"That's fine; I want to do the next one right up to the limit."

This time――

Ymy's answer rendered the operator speechless.

"Please let me continue just a little longer."

……It's no good at the current pace.

Nothing will change from what that person said if I keep going through the same training.

"Only you haven't changed one bit since three years ago."

Those words had been stabbed into her at the Grand Holy Hall by the woman who named herself as Tsali.

Three years ago —— since the time Sheltis had fallen to the Garden of Eden Corrupted Song, no matter how hard she thought she had worked, she'd been told that nothing had changed about her.

"You're doing your best as a Priestess? You've worked hard and grown? Those are illusions and that training that you throw your body into is also a phantom. A phantom with no corporeal body."

"Change. There is absolutely no opportunity to make your shinryoku bloom."

……An opportunity.

She didn't know whether pushing herself to the limit in the Priestesses' harsh training would become that opportunity. But she couldn't do nothing. As long as she held the title of Priestess, she couldn't allow herself to be overpowered by Yuugenshu.

……The world a thousand years ago and the Yuugenshu a thousand years ago.

……I was overpowered by the Yuugenshu's mateki at that time.

But my shinryoku shouldn't lose. When I grasped shinryoku as a '*wavelength*', Meimel said that I wouldn't lose to anyone with just the size of that wavelength.

"Go—t it, Ymy? If you fail to purify mateki, keep in mind that it's not that your power isn't up to the task; it's the opposite. Your shinryoku is too strong so you can't fine control it, so you should be wary that you can't release all your stored-up shinryoku."

——If so.

——The reason I was oppressed by the Yuugenshu's mateki is precisely because of that output efficiency.

Suppose that the Yuugenshu she fought in the world of a thousand years ago possessed 10 mateki and she had 20 shinryoku within her. However, compared to the Yuugenshu who could manifest 100% of its mateki, she probably hadn't even manifested half of hers.

10 mateki x an output efficiency of 100% = 10.

20 shinryoku x an output efficiency of 40% = 8.

In other words, even if her shinryoku was above, it would lose out when put in the form of a spell.

"That's why you're not suited for fine control-type spells like those of the Territory type or Barrier type. It's your natural disposition and not because you lack training. Can't you just focus on improving your shinryoku output by even one percent in the Baptism type that best shows your strength?"

"Please, just a little more……at least just four hours——"

Still hugging her shoulders that were shivering from the cold, Ymy looked up steadily at the broadcast device. My problem is my shinryoku output efficiency. In order to look for an opportunity to compensate for that, I need to devote my body to training even more dangerous than before.

"*……But*"

"Then two——"

Two hours only then please; the moment she said these words.

"*Ah……well, there's a guest for you, Ymy-sama……they're waiting in front of the floor's elevator.*"

"A guest? Who?"

A Priestess' training time is not to be infringed upon. It 's normal for the time to be changed no matter who it is so long as I'm secluded in training. It's rare for somebody to boldly put that aside and visit. If there was anybody, it would have to be my Sennenshi……I don't have one, so maybe it's a fellow Priestess?

"Is it Meimel or Syun-rei?"

"N-no……but you're right that it's a Priestess."

"It's Viola Nova-sama. She says she wants to see Ymy-sama ."

She was standing in front of the elevator doors with a smile upon her lips.

"It's been a while, Ymy-san; you look well."

A woman dressed in a robe-like vestment made of a single cloth with just a hole for the head. Her slender body was not much different from Syun-rei in height and she looked like she might be mistaken for a child from afar.

"W-we've really had no contact at all! It's truly been a while……"

Running right up to her, Ymy bowed deeply with ragged breathes.

Viola Nova —— her senior Priestess who held the position of third Priestess. She had spent more than half a year patrolling the Biotope with her Sennenshi partner and competent Elite Guards.

"Sorry……u-umm, I think it was four days ago. I knew you had returned to the tower but I was busy and couldn't come greet you."

"It's fine. I was also busy having just returned and you just returned from the Governmental Sector the day before last yourself, right?"

She had a gentle gaze that would relax those who saw it.

She was also petite like Syun-rei but the calm tone and gentleness of the Priestess in front of her was contrary to her physique and gave one a mature impression.

"That's right, I'll give you your souvenir before I forget. Here you go."

"……What's this?"

She grabbed Ymy's wrist and held it to chest-height, then wrapped her fingers around something.

It was a polished black stone. The surface was smooth like it had been polished with something and the entire thing had a roundness to it.

"It's obsidian I picked up in the Biotope; isn't it curious how it's been polished so beautifully by nature?"

"……Viola, I see you still have your hobby of collecting small stones."

Ymy smiled ironically in front of her senior Priestess. Her hobby of collecting small stones and adding "-san" when addressing other people irrespective of whether they were her kouhai hadn't changed.

"How was it outside the tower? You patrolled the Biotope the whole time this time too."

"It's the same great bundle of nature as always. The large dangerous beasts are and even the climate is all jumbled. Just when you think it's shining like in a desert,

there's a blizzard the next day and the day after that is a downpour. Having your tent blown away by a gale is also a commonplace event."

"……You sure made it though that all right."

"I got used to that bustle so it feels like something's missing here with the tower being so calm."

She smiled as her flaxen hair fluttered.

"By the way, Ymy-san, I'm sorry for being so sudden. I know you were in the middle of training."

"N-Not at all! The regulation time was over already!"

That she had wanted to do a little more and been in the middle of negotiating it was a secret, of course.

"That's actually a lie."

"Eh?"

"I didn't come knowing you were in the middle of training; I came because you were in the middle of training. I wanted to disrupt your training."

Viola looked fixedly up at her with her light brown eyes.

"Ymy-san, don't you know that excessive training will just burden your body?"

"……"

……I see, I thought it was strange.

This was a woman who was overflowing with consideration. She wasn't the type who would interrupt her training just to hand over a souvenir or because she wanted to see her.

……She'd intended to stop my excessive training from the start.

"I heard about it from Meimel-san. That it's been like this the whole time lately. But it looks like several days… …from just before you left for the Governmental Sector and after returning have been especially terrible. I was a little worried after hearing that. As for why——"

Viola spoke with a tone like she was scolding her own child.

That's definitely how it is. This person is……this '*older sister figure*' is always worrying about her junior Priestesses, Syun-rei and I, as if we were her children.

"I was thinking one of the reasons you're overdoing your training is related to my younger sister, Horn."

"……"

"So it really is?"

"……I don't know."

Viola looked directly up at her. She couldn't avert her eyes and it took her utmost just to muddle her words.

……But it's probably just as Viola says.

Wanting to purify the Garden of Eden Corrupted Song's mateki that resided within her childhood friend, Sheltis, was her thought as a childhood friend.

On top of that —— as the Priestess of Baptism, she thought it wouldn't do to remain this way, and that was probably because she was indebted to the Sennenshi, Horn Nova.

"Your younger sister is……"

"You'll understand if I say she's in Ward D of the hospital on floor 22, right?"

The clinic within the tower was divided into four wards based on patient condition.

Ward A handled emergency outpatients and the lightly wounded.

Ward B handled inpatients with grave wounds requiring surgery.

Ward C handled patients that were in serious life-threatening conditions.

And then, separated from even those three wards by a large door was Ward D. All patients taken to this ward were those showered in mateki. The response team was not of doctors but of apprentice Priestesses and those that the apprentice Priestsses could not treat were directly purified by a Priestess.

"……I see. That's right."

Sennenshi Horn had returned to the tower for only one reason. It wasn't to give a report but to visit a child who continued to sleep in one of the Ward D rooms.

"……I'm sorry."

"It's not something you need to apologize for. Meimel-san and I……even the first Priestess, Elmeetia-san, couldn't purify that mateki so it's not solely your responsibility."

"But!"

Her words blamed herself. Exactly because she understood that, Ymy could not pretend to not have heard it."

"……But everybody else has different specialties in spells!……I can't use anything other than Baptism-type spells well. I can't become anything other than the Priestess of Baptism."

"You think it's natural that you'd be the one to heal that child?"

"……Yes."

In reality, it was something Horn Nova had said to her .

"Ymy Ele Soufflenictole……you couldn't save Tessha!"

"Who cares about being a Priestess. This……even though you can't purify the mateki of a single child……even though you can't save a single child, what about you makes you a Priestess of Baptism!"

In a hospital ward with a cold wind blowing through it.

Those words spoken in front of that child whose eyes would not open were directed at me alone.

"……I thought you'd say that."

Viola slumped her delicate shoulders and sighed.

"The truth is I didn't really want to return. Because, Ymy-san, it's a given that you'd go overboard in your training and ruin your body when Horn returned to the tower."

"……But I must."

"I understand that you feel responsible for not being able to purify mateki while known under the honorary title of Priestess of Baptism, but please don't overdo it. The Priestesses' primary duty isn't to purify mateki. It's to maintain the barrier that seals the Garden of Eden Corrupted Song."

It was something she'd been admonished for countless times since her time as an apprentice Priestess.

A Priestess had to be ruthless. No matter who had to be sacrificed and even if she wanted to save someone near her, she had to focus her power solely on maintaining Hyouketsu Kyoukai.

"That's why it's Horn's fault for having excessive expectations of Priestesses."

"……"

"Please tell me if my little sister says anything to you. I 'll scold her as her older sister."

"……Okay."

Well then —— conveying that softly, the third Priestess turned around. She watched her as she used the elevator to head to her own floor.

"……"

Letting out a truly deep sigh towards the ceiling, Ymy loosely stumbled to the wall. ……I can't put any power into my limbs. When she noticed that, the strength left her knees and she collapsed.

"Having excessive expectations of me……that just means she had that much expectation for me. ……She probably believed in and relied on me."

She couldn't fulfill Horn's expectations that day. Even though she was probably her last hope, as the one known as the Priestess of Baptism.

"……Ah……ah……haha, it's cold."

Maybe it was because of the training. It couldn't be helped that her body was freezing so she curled up and crouched there.

……

……It's been a while since I've been frustrated to the point of wanting to cry.

"Why……is it……so cold, I wonder."

The girl's hoarse laughter echoed.

Before long, that laughter had changed to a faint sob at some point.

Chapter 2 – The Resounding Horn's Dissonance

Part 1

Sunlight that made one think of the height of summer shined down brilliantly upon the outdoor training grounds.

In a corner of the grounds which had a desert that spread as far as the horizon, rocky terrain, a marsh and large roaring waterfall——

"Ohh……ohhh! Ohhhhhhh!"

Gripping her shining silver badge, Kagura held it high up.

"A-Amazing! L-look, look. On the display in the corner, in the '*merit points*' field, there are 75 points. The points from the Governmental Sector expedition have been added!"

"So noisy. Everybody got them so they know without you ranting about it."

He glanced at his own badge and tucked it away at his chest with disinterest.

"You brat."

"I-It's fine, isn't it! One should be honestly happy in times like this. Come on, don't put yours away and show it to me!"

She held out her hands.

"Haa? It's not interesting looking at other people's badges."

"It's fine. Come on, quickly……mm? H-huh? Why are your points higher than mine? What's the meaning of these 102 points? Did you go out on a mission without us knowing?"

"Like I'd do such annoying stuff."

Vaiel snatched his badge from Kagura who was repeatedly tilting her head.

"Ah, wait!"

"Before we went to the Governmental Sector, the theme for final selection of the unit was patrolling the Nature District. Somebody got exhausted by a

Yuugenshu and caused me great pains, or did you forget ?"

"Ah……"

The redness of Kagura's cheeks shot up under the machine helmet.

It had been Vaiel who saved her at the last moment when she'd been attacked by a Yuugenshu and he had repelled it while covered completely in wounds. It was necessary to earn '*merit points*' to be promoted in Tenketsu (Sophia) Palace and other than missions, there were other ways to gain points like defeating Yuugenshu.

"*Ahh, now that you mention it, the points for defeating a Yuugenshu are also included. The difference in your merit points is 27, so it's being classified as a small Yuugenshu. You would've earned twice as much if it were a little larger.*"

"Like I can fight something that big."

Vaiel folded his arms in response to the murmuring from machine crystal (Ilis).

"……Come to think of it, how many points are necessary for the all-important promotion to Regular Guard?"

"Think of it as being around 300."

Monica, who was cooling off in a tree's shade, replied immediately.

"You can register for the Regular Guard exam when you save up 300 points. Even if you don't pass within a year, you can continue to take on missions and you should be exempted from the written exam at 450 points."

"If you think of it like that……I have pretty much half."

Sitting on the bench in the tree's shade, Sheltis also took out his badge.

179 merit points. This was the sum of the Governmental Sector mission as well as the investigation mission to the floating archipelago with Leon. He'd also repelled at Yuugenshu that time so that was added as well.

Lagoon

Two missions and two cases of repelling Yuugenshu. With that, his merit points had passed over the halfway point.

"How about Monica?"

"I have 231 points……since I was part of different units to fill the number requirements before creating this one. I have a little from that time."

"*Ohh. But that's impressive; you'll have 300 points with just a little more like that.*"

"Th-that is……I've been a Cadet Guard for some years now. It normally takes just over a year to accumulate them……I'm more of a failure of a Cadet Guard."

Monica looked down with her face a little red.

"Well, that's true, it should take around a year if you seriously gather them at a steady pace. If you think of it like that, you could say the expedition to the Governmental Sector this time is receiving special treatment. For other missions, the usual is 10 or 20 points ."

It looked like it really was hot standing out in direct sunlight as Kagura took off her machine helmet and wiped the sweat from her brow.

"Also, by standard, even if you complete a mission unharmed, you can't apply consecutively. You're free to take on missions but it seems you won't receive merit points."

"Was there such a rule?"

"It's just that you don't know, Vaiel. This is an something from when there was no merit points system but it seems like there was a two-person group of absurdly strong Cadet Guards."

It looked like she was still hot because Kagura started fanning herself with her hand.

"It was even said that there was no mission those two couldn't complete together and they would complete a mission every week systematically, advancing to Regular Guards just like that. It should have repainted the fastest recorded promotion at the time. This became a problem further in the future."

"Mm, hey, wait. What's the problem with that? It's not bad, is it?"

"There were no issues with those two themselves. The problem was the flood of Cadet Guards that took their success as an example and continuously submitted applications for missions."

The girl indicated the training grounds with her eyes.

Amongst those several instructors were watching over were those repeating mock battles, Cadet Guards running through the hot sand with weights all over and those silently focused on muscle training.

"There are many Cadet Guards with superficial experience and who are unskilled, right? Those Cadet Guards can't succeed if they challenge a mission without minding the difficulty……as a result, there were successive cases where they failed or were wounded and hospitalized."

"So it's about knowing your limits. Sheesh, there are morons no matter the age."

Vaiel returned to reclining on the bench.

"Well, the moronic group is at fault, but the audacious group of two shares the same fault. Because of them, now it's become a pain in the ass to take on a mission."

"……Could I say it's the fault of youth?"

"Mm?"

"Ahh, n-no, no, nothing at all!?"

With the quick-eared young man's question, Sheltis frantically waved his hands.

……I can't say it.

……That it was Leon and I.

They would take two missions in a day, return to Tenketsu Palace (Sophia) just after an all-nighter and then leave on another mission an hour later. Now that he thought of it, even he thought it was reckless.

"It's true that there are some inconveniences, but I think the current system is good."

Putting down the machine helmet at her feet, Kagura did some flexibility stretches before training.

"Leaving aside that I'm busy with research work, I think that going out on a mission every week is dangerous. Fatigue would build up without your notice and it would be the worst if you became too used to missions and went lax resulting in an incident. Rather than that, it's better to properly undergo moderate training――"

"Hohoh, that's admirable, Kagura."

"Wh-wha!?"

Kagura's pointed ears stood up at the sudden appearance of somebody behind her. She turned towards the owner of the voice with trepidation and a pale expression……

"I-Instructor Yumelda?"

"It's truly admirable, Kagura; I didn't expect you to be so admirably dedicated."

A tall woman wearing a dark blue suit that had not a wrinkle upon it. She held her preferred black whip with both hands and she was smoking a cigarette as thin as string.

"You've been skipping my training lately with being busy with research as the stated reason. Just when I thought your research had finally calmed down, you were absent from my training because of the expedition to the Governmental Sector. For this last month, I think you've been absent from training more than you've attended. Now then, is my memory mistaken?"

"Ah……n-no……that's, well……"

Her pointed ears drooped and sweat ran from her brow like a waterfall.

Opposite that, the instructor looked down at her with an intrepid smile.

"With all that, I didn't think you would have such ambition to train. I'm not a demon: I'll accept absences with valid reasons and I also very rarely hold back on the training. ——But if you want to train that badly, then it can't be helped. It's also hard on me to train Cadet

Guards until they're ragged but it's different if they desire that themselves."

"Even though you look so ridiculously happyyyyy——————!?"

"You talk too much; let's go."

"N-Noooooooo!"

Kagura was grabbed by the nape and started to get dragged away. She screamed like prey that had been caught by a carnivorous predator.

"H-Help me! M-Monica? A member of your unit is in fatal danger! Sheltis and Vaiel too——"

With that scene before them, the decisions of the remaining members were swift and correct.

"……Come to think of it, I made an appointment to check up on the wound I received from Golden Maha at the Governmental Sector."

"Ah, I-I also feel like I did that. If you're going to the one on floor 22, let's go together."

"……The deadline for the manuscript of my '*Wild Grasses Encyclopedia*' is coming up soon too."

Turning their backs, Sheltis and the others all sprinted away simultaneously at full speed.

It felt like Kagura shouted out something behind them but the fault lay with she who had summoned the demon instructor.

"Well then, Kagura, take your time with the instructor."

"So heartless————————!?"

Part 2

Tenketsu (Sophia) Palace, floor 21.

"Uu……it was cruel."

Covered in sand and dust, her formal wear was completely worn out. Kagura returned like that with tottering steps late in the evening.

"If it's something like being trained ragged by the instructor, then going on a mission and not receiving merit points is better. Monica, please find our next mission as soon as possible."

"G-Got it."

She looked pretty tired. Slumped over the machine pearl, Kagura made no move to descend to the ground.

"By the way……what is this meeting room?"

Despite being dead tired, it seemed that only her curiosity was full of vigor as she looked around restlessly .

It was an all-around white room.

There was no table and thus no meeting-use whiteboard. There were just barely enough folding chairs for them piled up in a corner of the room.

"It's our unit's private base. I received a message that our unit has finally received official approval and the administrative officer's electronic registration is complete ."

Monica pointed at the folding chairs.

"This is our private meeting area from today onwards. The use differs from unit to unit so these are the only furnishings. They said that if we require a table or whiteboard, then we can apply for them and they will allocate them to us."

"So we've got a private space; it's starting to get more like a unit."

"Vaiel, I'll just put this out there, but don't use this place for your naps. It looks like if it's used for reasons outside of our goals, it'll get confiscated."

"……Damn it."

She seemed to have hit the bullseye since Vaiel crossed his legs with the same sour face.

"But you know, wouldn't it be hard for them to find out? If it's our private space, doesn't that mean that only our badges' identification numbers can unlock it?"

There was no way for other people to suspect him of sleeping in this room. Only the four here could unlock the room.

"That's right, or so I'd like to say."

"*Ah, I can open this room. Rather, the only ones who can't open this room are other Cadet Guards and Regular Guards; Elite Guards that hold the rank of Captain or higher can unlock it just like that.*"

Machine Ilis crystal smoothly continued Monica's words.

But upon hearing that, Vaiel's smile became even more relaxed.

"Then there's no problem. Is some great and mighty Elite Guard or above gonna even come to this lower floor ? If there's any chance, it'll be the instructor but the instructor usually instructs Cadet Guards at the training grounds."

"*……That's true.*"

"Now that you mention it, that might be the case."

Machine Ilis crystal blinked and Sheltis ended up agreeing without thinking.

"But you know, Vaiel. If by chance a superior――"

"Ahh? Just where would you find great and mighty people with such idle curiosity――"

It came before Vaiel finished speaking.

――'*Unlocked*'――

With an electronic sound, the electronic doors slid to the sides slowly.

"Hah?"

Vaiel fell silent with his mouth half-open.

There was no way someone above Elite Guard level would come to this low a floor and there was no way they would visit them. Why is it opening even though the meeting room's door shouldn't open?

"Ah, umm……I heard that you'd be here when I asked Instructor Yumelda."

In front of the fully opened doors, a girl in pure white vestments bowed her head.

"Ymy……?"

"……Why is a Priestess here?"

Monica's and Kagura's eyes were spinning.

"Oh my, Ymy, welcome. We don't have anything other than folding chairs but will you take a seat?"

"No, I just came to apologize."

Remaining diffidently near the wall, Ymy once again bowed her head deeply.

"Well, I'm sorry! I didn't participate in the meeting today and caused you problems……I heard the major points from Ishtar-san!"

……Mm?

Looking closely at the expression of his childhood friend whose off-gold hair was fluttering —— Sheltis raised his brows at some thoughts that didn't appear on his face.

……Ymy's eyes are swollen.

The area around her eyelids was slightly red and looked like she'd cried her eyes out. It was pretty much fully concealed behind her bangs so it was almost a coincidence that Sheltis had noticed. The other three hadn't noticed.

"Ymy……sama, we were told that you were in training until just prior."

"Y-yes. That's right, and a little……well……I was a little willful."

"Willful? With training?"

Monica's gaze narrowed. For she who had been Ymy's senpai when she was an apprentice Priestess, she was still concerned with her kouhai's condition even now.

"N-No, it's just a minor……thing."

Averting her eyes from Monica's line of sight, Ymy turned around as if running away.

"Well then, I'm sorry. I'll be going now!"

"Ah, wait a second! Ymy!"

Monica's outstretched hand stopped just before touching the Priestess' vestment.

"……It can't be helped; it must be major if she's unwilling to talk about it."

Monica shook her head weakly.

"So what do we do, unit leader? I'd really like to head back and sleep right now."

"I know. We'll disperse for today and take a day off for tomorrow. We'll continue as usual from early morning training the day after. ……Since we haven't had sufficient rest since returning from the Governmental Sector."

She took a deep breath while rubbing her eyes that were heavy with fatigue.

"Waa, it's an entire day off, Sheltis! I want to go on a picnic in the Nature District tomorrow. The weather's supposed to be good and it's the best time to see the mountain cherries." [1]

"That's a pity since I was gonna to leisurely relax tomorrow too."

"*Ehhhhh!? No, no, no, let's go somewheeere?*"

Putting aside machine Ilis crystal who was blinking in protest.

……I'm also interested in Ymy.

……It would be nice if I could secretly check on how she is tomorrow.

"Then we'll separate here. Don't forget that we're meeting up in front of the training grounds' gate at four in the morning the day after tomorrow!"

Monica clapped her hands.

"Fi—nally over. I'm gonna go back and sleep; see ya."

"Then so will I……"

Vaiel left the meeting room quickly. Just before Sheltis followed after him, machine Ilis crystal flashed as if remembering something.

"Come to think of it, Sheltis, there was something this morning."

"Mm?"

"Come on, didn't you make a promise with Eyriey? Eyriey said she wanted to come play and you said you'd be able to meet with her after the meeting ended, didn't you?"

"Ah, ahhhhh! Crap!"

The meeting with Ishtar present had ended and he'd completely forgotten about it until now.

"She might still be waiting in your room."

"Uu……for the time being, let's rush back. W-Well then, Monica, I'll also be going now!"

Spinning around in a big rush, he left the meeting room and flew out into the floor's corridor.

Beyond the windows on one side of the corridor was a surface of black. The setting sun was already hidden behind the horizon and it was too late of a time to play.

"……I wonder if I've been keeping Eyriey waiting."

He jogged down the hallway straight towards the elevator. He pushed the panel for "Floor 11 which contained the Cadet Guard residences and sighed a little.

Part 3

Tenketsu (Sophia) Palace, floor 11.

Just as he took one step into his room that was pretty much right at the back of the Cadet Guard residences,

"So slo—w! Where were you loitering around, Sheltis! "

"Shel-nii, you're late."

Eyriey glared at him with raised eyes and Yuto was sitting properly on the bed.

……

……Well, that's what I expected.

"*Oh, this is unexpected: nobody's here.*"

"……It looks like they were waiting here before though."

The bed was ruffled and there were candy wrappers in the garbage can.

Eyriey had eaten the candy she brought along and Yuto had played around on the bed. He could easily imagine those two.

"It looks like they got tired of waiting and went home."

"But it looks like they left a message."

What machine (Ilis) crystal was talking about was an audio recording device left casually atop the desk. The small pencil-shaped device had a sound collection apparatus attached to the end. He hadn't seen a device like it anywhere else in the tower so it was most likely an invention of Eyriey's.

"That flashing part is probably the replay button."

"This?"

There was a replay button on one end of the pencil-shaped device. He timidly pushed it,

"Eyri-nee, this button?"

"Yup, yup. It'll record if you talk while pressing that. Yuto, try saying something."

It was those two's voices as expected.

"Mm〜……What should Yuto say?"

"Sheltis, you're so slo—w. We'll come back tomorrow so make sure to keep some time open! ——I said it. So, Yuto, just say what you want to."

"O—kay! Um, umm, Shel-nii, I'll come again tomorrow—"

"——So they say."

"Isn't that fine since you're already on break tomorrow anyway? Rather than that……"

Ilis

Machine crystal' voice that had a suppressed laugh mixed into it quieted down a notch.

"It looks like there's one other message from someone."

Occupying about half of the work desk was a giant monitor and computer.

The terminal which was normally in power saving mode had its electric lamp flashing blue, showing that a message had arrived.

"……So this time's by mail though I haven't really used this terminal at all."

"They don't really come to this terminal; that's rare."

If it was for sending and receiving simple messages, their card-shaped badges had that function. It was the norm for Monica, the instructor, Leon and others to use the badge to contact him.

"I wonder who it is."

"I think it should be an administrative officer since they mailed you on this terminal. A Guard would probably use the badge to mail you."

"Well, yeah."

Starting up the monitor, the message inbox was shown .

"……Huh? The sender's information isn't showing up. It can't be viewed."

"It's not that it's not being shown; it has an upper authority's secret encryption applied. If it was a regular mail, then it could be inspected by the one in charge of computer processing at the General Affairs Bureau but this can't be viewed by anybody except the recipient."

It used an uncommon frequency. Putting aside administrative staff and Elite Guard-level Guards, it was something that a Cadet Guard would rarely ever have the chance to use.

"Ohh, that's interesting. Come on, open it quickly—"

"I got it, okay, so wait a second."

Ilis

Calming down machine crystal who was hurrying him on, he inserted his ID into the encrypted document.

"To Sheltis,

Good work today. Sorry I couldn't attend the meeting. I also said a little about it when I interrupted your meeting earlier… ……I've been thinking about Priestess training."

"……Ymy?"

"She's forgotten to put her name at either end of the mail but that's who it would appear to be from the contents."

"O-On top of that!

It's about that which is residing in your body but……since then, I wonder if I've done my best in piling on training. If you have time tomorrow, could you come to floor 276 past noon?

Sorry for being so sudden.

I wanted to tell you in person but it looks like you were together with Monica-senpai for the entire day today.

……I want to try purifying that.

U-Um, just so you know. It's okay if you can't come!

It's not like it absolutely has to be tomorrow……it's just, the truth is……I can't say that I have great confidence. It's fine if you have something else to do and prioritize that.

But.

If you don't have anything tomorrow…… "

The mail ended there.

There was no name for the sender……but there was no need to think about who it was now.

"She said floor 276."

"It's Ymy's private training floor. There are almost ten rooms matched to Ymy's spells and a number of those can be used to purify mateki."

"……I see."

The mail referring to mateki as '*that*' may have been for the one in ten thousand chance that somebody saw the contents.

……The mateki that came to reside in my body when I fell to the Garden of Corrupted Eden Song.

……If this mateki is purified, I wonder if my shinryoku will return.

"*Aren't you making quite the complicated expression? Aren't you happy about getting your mateki purified?*"

"I shouldn't be unhappy."

Whispering that as if talking to himself, Sheltis sat down on a corner of the bed. He laid down, stared up at the illuminated ceiling and took a deep breath.

"But if my mateki is purified and my shinryoku returns just like that, it feels like it'll end with a '*That's great, that's great*'."

It was miraculous that he had returned from the Garden of Corrupted Eden Song alive and even had mateki reside within him.

He had a feeling the passion for investigating the cause for that had finally died down and changed into " Well, you made it out so it's all good".

……But was that really okay?

If the mateki residing within him was the key to approaching the secret of the Garden of Corrupted (Eden) Song, wouldn't the chance to come close to that secret be lost along with the disappearance of his mateki?

"……When we went to the Governmental Sector, that' s the feeling I had."

The Yuugenshu being bred within a water tank. They had thought it was the work of the Governmental Sector, but it was then determined to be the work of a third organization that Golden (Maha) and Blank (Igun-I) belonged to.

……Moreover, there's the Forbidden Crystal.

……The Governmental Sector's treasure, Mikuva's Crimson Eye, was also like that.

The Yuugenshu, the third organization and the Forbidden Crystal as well. ……And me. Everything is

connected. Everything should have the '*Garden of Eden Corrupted Song*' as a common point.

"I feel like I've caught onto something. What is it……I can't say it well but it feels like I've touched something extremely important. In regards to the Garden of Eden Corrupted Song's secret."

More than any Guard and more than any Priestess.

He was closing in on the Garden of Eden Corrupted Song's secret: that's what he felt.

"If I can investigate the Garden of Eden Corrupted Song's secret like this, we might find a more effective method of combatting the Yuugenshu and mateki."

It might also lessen the burden on Ymy as a Priestess. He might be able to become a source of strength for her in other areas as he aimed to become her guard.

"……"

"Is it strange?"

"*……I just thought about how you can think like that.*"

There was a ten minute pause between her words —— Ilis machine crystal continued speaking with a tone like she was gazing into the distance.

"Aiming to become a Sennenshi is something you have a promise with Ymy for but there's no difference in the goal between you and other Guards in the end……but what you just said might truly be something that only you can achieve."

Being her guard was a given, but he'd found another way to become Ymy's strength. But that was because he had mateki residing within him. If that was purified, he'd likely lose the opportunity to near the secret of the Garden of Eden Corrupted Song.

"It's a new complication. But you'll accept Ymy's invitation for tomorrow, right?"

"Yeah……I want to hear Ymy's opinion as well."

He couldn't become a Sennenshi with mateki residing within his body. That was also part of the reason Ymy was so concerned about him.

……But she's gonna attempt to purify it so suddenly tomorrow.

He was also thankful that it was early. However, he felt that the summons were rushed and suddenly having it tomorrow was also out of the blue.

"I wonder if something happened with Ymy."

The hope that the mateki within his body could be purified had faded and become a form of worry for Ymy at some point.

Part 4

Floors 276 to 280 were the five Priestesses' respective personal training floors and floors 271 to 275 beneath that were the Sennenshis' respective training floors. [2]

And floor 273.

One step off the elevator and there was a dense forest which faithfully modeled the Biotope.

Underfoot were very moist mud and puddles as well as fallen leaves. Overhead, countless vines hanging from the trees crisscrossed like a spiderweb.

In this forest where a real bird was flying around chirping——

A gunshot.

The repeated ear-splitting gunfire noise shook the large trees.

"——Rejected. Next?"

"Y-Yes. From the Shinryoku Theory Bureau Chief, this is about the deployment of apprentice Priestesses. There are fifty apprentice Priestesses this year that passed the first training period. How many people would the third unit like……"

The small boy holding a report read it aloud.

"That's based on skill; apprentice Priestesses that can't be used are unnecessary."

The woman with a pitch black blinder spat out her answer.

Her body which was as tall as an adult man was covered in a camouflaged suit and she wore a longcoat that reached to below her knees.

She had a machine pistol in each hand.

It was a gun that had its firepower and consecutive firing speed raised to the limits to compensate for its low accuracy. She held those casually in both hands and casually pulled the triggers.

"Only choose the outstanding apprentice Priestesses."

"B-But the struggle with other units is harsh."

"It's your job to deal with that."

With the resounding of gunfire, small target machines fell down one after another.

She was shooting down the small target machines that were flying at super-high speeds in the gaps between the trees whose leaves crowded those spaces, and she was doing it without a single miss.

"……"

"Is that all?"

"……Ah, n-no! S-Sorry!"

With the woman's disinterested question, the boy frantically shook his head.

"Err……umm, I was fascinated by how amazing Captain Horn is."

"How so?"

She asked again in a tone that had not a shred of sociability.

Horn Nova —— the younger sister of the third Priestess, Viola Nova; she was also the third Sennenshi who was tasked with guarding her.

"Eh?"

"I was asking what you thought was amazing."

"E-Everything……is what……"

Physical strength that was trained to the point that she could handle those massive machine pistols with one

hand easily. Then there were her elbows and shoulders which were pliable to handle the strong recoil from repetitive firings of those guns.

Above all, there was her supernatural firing accuracy which never let her miss her target even with both eyes covered.

A blinder over her eyes. In other words, Horn didn't see the target. Without regard for that, the bullets she fired seemed to be sucked towards the center of the target machines. It was a scene that would cause normal people to doubt their eyes.

"I……If I practice, will I be able to become like the Captain――"

"Discard pointless thoughts."

The odd jobs boy spoke some words and Horn fired off words of rejection.

"Whether it's talent, environment, effort, time, personality or body, nothing fits. The mechanically armored soldiers that you're talking about

Ex Machina

are generalists that can handle any heavy firepower gun to suit the circumstances. What can you do when you don't have any of the required factors?"

"……Ah……ahh……"

Horn's gunfire didn't stop even as the boy was at a loss for words and downcast.

"Is that all?"

"———Yes."

The boy turned his back to her while still downcast after putting the report under his arm. He walked towards the elevator wordlessly like that.

"Catria."

Without having walked several steps, Horn's voice called the boy's name.

Silence.

The two machine pistols that were still letting off white smoke from their barrels were thrown high up into the air.

"Take these with you."

"Waa, wawa!"

"Do the regular maintenance. I'll come to collect it thirty eight hours later."

The boy threw aside the report and caught the machine pistols. With her back still turned to him, Horn drew out a revolving pistol from the holder at her waist.

"I don't need unskilled people in my unit. If you're going to subject yourself to techniques unsuited for your height, leave my unit before the end of today."

"……"

——Bang!

The gunfire in front of the silent boy shot down two target machines.

They were randomly flying targets. One aside, aiming for two at the same time wasn't possible. That's right, it was a technique impossible unless one could see the future.

"But I acknowledge your skill in maintenance."

"……I see."

"I'll say it again: thirty eight hours later. Finish the maintenance within that time."

The boy nodded wordlessly.

This time he headed to the elevator without turning around and went straight down to the ground floor.

——Ding.

Passing by the elevator headed for the ground floor, another elevator stopped at this floor.

"Yoo—, Horn, you here—"

A boyish girl with her skin tanned brown. With light formal wear consisting of a short-sleeved shirt and short pants, shinryoku formal carved seals could be seen on her exposed limbs.

"Ran."

"Ohh, you're here. If you're coming back, say so—. By the way"

"I refuse."

"……I haven't said anything yet."

"I can see the future."

"Liar."

Ran raised one eyebrow meaningfully.

"**You can only see future images** but can't hear future sounds; you said that yourself."

Celestial map drawing.

It was a territorial type shinryoku spell that Horn Nova carried from birth like her older sister, Priestess Viola Nova. With this power that allowed one to view the future an instant prior, it was possible to tell where a target would move to and pull the trigger.

"Then I'll just ask for your business. What is it?"

Storing the gun in her holder, Horn sighed.

"All right, then let's have a match now. It's been a whi ——"

"I refuse."

"……Eh—, what's with that. Did Leon make a reservation first? If so, I'm fine with going after Leon."

She pulled on the edges of her coat with a childish expression.

"Time is precious and I have some business after this."

"Is that soo? But sparring with me will definitely be fun and come in handy? It's a complete loss if the Sennenshi skip out on training. Right?"

"Unfortunately, business that takes precedence over everything else is awaiting me."

Glancing at Ran who was puffing her cheeks with a mu—, Horn turned towards the elevator used for the upper floors.

Part 5

The floor was filled to the brim with noon sunlight.

In this place that was close to two thousand metres off the ground, the sunlight passing through the window's glass could be seen without obstruction.

Tenketsu (Sophia) Palace, floor 276. It was a floor made to allow a Priestess to devote herself to training.

"……The floor is shining blue?"

Standing in the floor Ymy was waiting at, Sheltis stared down at the view under him.

A pattern spread far out on the floor's surface. The blue pattern's contrast with the white floor was beautiful but it was also a little eerie because he didn't know what it was for.

"*All of this is a formal carved seal.*"

"……That's amazing."

He had heard it was a facility that could also purify people corrupted with mateki. It meant that a person

suffering from mateki would also directly enter and exit so measures to prevent the spread of mateki within the tower were necessary.

"Sheltis, are you okay?"

"I have my boots in-between."

The rejection between the mateki residing within him and the shinryoku-affixed floor. There was a numbing feeling at his toes but it wasn't unbearable.

"Come to think of it, she didn't specify as far as the place."

"That's right. I wonder which room it is."

The far end of the passage was blurry. At any rate, it had the expansiveness of an entire floor of the tower so even if Ymy had arrived, he had no idea where she was.

"Over here."

To his right, a room's mechanical door slowly opened.

"……I'm glad. You came."

Her off-gold hair swayed with relief. Her expression looked more relieved than happy.

"I thought it wouldn't be possible because it was such a sudden request. ……Did you skip training to come here?"

"Nope, today's a full day of rest. Training starts tomorrow."

Ah, so that's it. My plans for today start in the evening so now that you mention it, that should be how it is. The Governmental Sector mission exhausted everyone —— well, let's put that aside. Come over here and enter the room."

……This is a Priestess' training room?

……Well, this is.

It was covered from the floor to the ceiling in pure white tiles and a formal carved seal was carved in atop that as expected. It was just the floor for the corridor but this room was covered on the walls and ceiling thoroughly, in every nook and cranny.

"It's a room specially for me. But this isn't a training room, you know?"

Ymy turned towards him at the center of the room and pointed at the formal carved seal overhead.

A shadow fell over her eyes.

She had remembered a painful past event —— it was that kind of expression.

"It's not for training but for actual use. ……It's a place for Priestesses to heal those with heavy corruption that apprentice Priestesses can't purify."

"……Ymy, do you not like this place?"

"I like it."

Just that answer was clear and without doubt.

"In the little under a year since I became a Priestess, there have been four. Four times that a person has been carried to this room. Those people who had a request made because there were none amongst the apprentice Priestesses who could handle it. It's a room to save those suffering from mateki……so I couldn't hate it."

She bit down on her lip.

The Priestess, his childhood friend, continued staring up at the ceiling.

"But……it was harsh. We would forcefully lie the person afflicted with mateki mind control over on that bed and purify them. It was a procedure we would perform while watching them writhe in agony despite that. That dark red stain is from a person whose body

underwent necrosis and tore from the decaying effect of mateki……the green stain on the other side is also someone's blood. The iron within their body was morphed and their blood turned green."

"……So what happened to those people?"

"They were cured. All of those I mentioned were cured and are rehabilitating. There are also those that have been discharged so I'm really happy. ……But healing them isn't ideal. To begin with, it'd be better if there was nobody who needed to be healed. It'd be the best if we could live in a world where we didn't have to fear the Yuugenshu……"

The mere fact that somebody would be carried to this room is something that shouldn't happen.

If the Priestesses' Hyouketsu Kyoukai completely froze the Garden of Eden Corrupted Song, Yuugenshu wouldn't be able to come up to floating Orbie Clar continent. People afflicted with the Yuugenshu's mateki would also cease to exist.

A perfect barrier.

A perfect Hyouketsu Kyoukai.

It was the ideal that the Priestesses had as their goal.

"So! That's not good, that's not good. I went off on a tangent again."

Ymy slapped her cheeks with an adorable sound. She shook her head two, three times side to side and took a deep breath.

"All right! Then I'll do my best, so I look forward to working with you!"

"E-Err……?"

"I said it yesterday, didn't I? You also came because you heard, right?"

His childhood friend beckoned him over from the center of the room.

"……About my mateki?"

"Yeah, I don't have any confidence yet that it can be cured but I want to try it. ——Come on, come over to this bed."

A large bed was situated just in front of where Ymy was standing.

The bed with white sheets spread over it was not a rectangular shape, but the shape of the ┼ character. The patient would lie with their arms spread out and there were black belts for restraining a rampaging patient.

"*Hey, hey, Ymy, let's bind Sheltis～?*"

"It's a pity but I won't rampage."

He took off the pendant that machine Ilis crystal was attached to and placed it on the tray beside the bed. He looked down at the bed once more.

"……"

"What's wrong?"

"Ah, nothing. ……I'm kinda nervous. I feel like I really shouldn't be lying on this bed."

It was also his first time receiving the mateki purification technique and it was a request to his childhood friend, which made him even more nervous.

Lying down on the bed was like getting an examination at a hospital so he couldn't settle down.

"Sheltis has been bad with hospitals since a long time ago after all. Ymy, what will you do?"

"Eh……h-hr—m, what to do. After all, those carried to this room couldn't stand on their own. I was never asked a question like that."

Ymy let her gaze wander through the air while silently thinking.

"……I think it'll be fine if you just sit on the bed."

"Ah, that's a relief. That should be pretty easy."

He sat down lightly on the bed.

"Then please."

"R-Right! I'll do my best!"

Ymy nodded, then——

The air shook.

A complete one-eighty from the gentleness that even seemed to exude a smile, it changed to a tension that seemed like it even stung the skin.

……This.

……might be……the first time I've seen this.

The childhood friend before his eyes —— no, with the form of the "Priestess" before him, Sheltis gulped.

Priestess Ymy Ele Soufflenictole.

Her jade green eyes stared unblinking at him. Crimson particles of light suddenly rose up from her entire body.

……Three years ago……the time when I returned to the floating continent……Ymy wasn't a Priestess yet.

Orbie Clar

Ymy who had been an apprentice Priestess at the time had tried time after time to purify his mateki……and had cried herself dry when it ended in failure.

And now.

This was the first time Ymy was facing the purification of his mateki as a Priestess.

"——I'm starting."

[Unto me, all the wishes that of which I am able.....]

[ele So Phi-a-s Arma-Riris]

A release precedent meaning the invocation of power was sung from the Priestess' lips. Immediately afterwards, the overflowing crimson particles wrapped around her body.

……My throat's dry.

His lips, tongue and throat had dried up from nervousness and he couldn't speak.

"Don't move."

Ymy's fingertip that was held straight out neared the center of his chest.

……Can she actually purify it?

……Maybe it's possible for even my mateki if it's Ymy's spell.

The mateki of the Garden of Eden Corrupted Song. Would the cursed power that no Priestess could purify three years ago become undone?

The fingertip neared his chest.

The tip of the nail touched the center of his chest and touched his skin through the clothes——

——Bzz……zzt!……——

"……!"

"Ow……uu!"

Sparks like lightning instantly expanded into something like an aurora and seemed to be rejecting the touch of Ymy's fingertips.

Elbert Resonance.

……No……way!

It used to be just sparks. That grew into this aurora-like barrier!?

"The Elbert Resonance is manifesting even more strongly than before!? Ymy, this isn't good, you must stop the ritual——"

"Kuu……uuu……!"

But Ymy didn't stop the ritual. The shockwaves given off by the Elbert Resonance barrier stopped her breathes but she stood her ground and reached her fingers out even further——

Deja vu.

In that instant, the future image of Ymy collapsing with bright red blood spurting from her entire right arm surfaced clearly within the back of his mind.

"Get back!"

"!?"

Her shoulders contracted at the sudden shout and Ymy pulled back reflexively. At the same time, the mist cleared up and the Elbert Resonance sparks also disappeared.

"……Ah……haa……a……"

Ymy shoulders moved up and down and she couldn't hide her ragged breathing. Her fingertips were dyed with a crimson different from that of the baptism type arts.

"Ymy——"

He jumped off the bed.

He tried to run over to his childhood friend who was crouching and hugging her legs.

"Don't!"

It was at the same time.

When Sheltis took one step, Ymy's shout echoed throughout the room.

……Don't?

What am I not supposed to do in this situation?

"……Shel, ti……s……you……sit there!"

The girl spoke with her head still down, in a voice like a sob.

"……Once……mo……re……"

Once more.

Sheltis doubted his ears when he heard what was conveyed to him from Ymy's lips.

……Once more?

……It can't be that having seen that Elbert Resonance just now, she wants to try once more?

"Ha, ah……hahaa. ……Sorry, I failed. Next……"

The Preistess of Baptism stood up unsteadily.

She was trying hard to hide the intense pain with a pale face.

"For the next one……I'll do my best……"

"Ymy!"

In order to stop the girl who was wobbly drawing nearer, he stood before her with arms held out to the sides.

"I'm really……happy that you feel that way. But let's stop here for today."

"……"

"Anybody would understand that you're doing your absolute best from seeing what happened just now. Even

I understood at a glance. That's why I have faith that you will be able to purify my mateki in the near future."

……Really?

His own words sounded like exactly like somebody else's sophistry.

……If Ymy trains beyond this, will she really be able to purify my mateki?

Ymy's maturing shinryoku spells.

But as those spells grew in strength, Elbert Resonance would also grow stronger. To get rid of that repulsion, Ymy would try even harder but the Elbert Resonance barrier will get even stronger?

An endless vicious cycle. It would undoubtedly turn into that prediction.

"Th-That's why……for today……"

It was clear when he saw Ymy's eyes just before. She hadn't been holding back and used all her power. With

the result being the Elbert Resonance just now, it would be difficult for her to purify his mateki in her current state.

"……"

Ymy didn't speak as she drew deep breaths.

"……You're right."

A dry smile.

Different from the long silence just now, she spoke intermittently.

"So it wasn't possible again. ……How bad it is, even though I'm supposed to be the Baptism Priestess. I'll be scolded by Horn-san like this too."

"Horn?"

There was only one Guard in Tenketsu Palace (Sophia) who identified with that name.

The third Sennenshi, Horn Nova. Born with a unique shinryoku spell, she was the Ex Machina who was versed in every kind of gun.

"That Sennenshi? Did something happen?"

"……Just a little something."

Ymy rubbed her eyes to dispel her faintly self-deprecating smile and moved her hand away from the bed.

"Hey, Sheltis, I want to get some outside air so shall we go to the floor above?"

Come with me.

With her delicate back telling him that, Ymy's vestments fluttered.

"……I'll remember more than necessary if we talk in this room, after all."

Part 6

Tenketsu Palace (Sophia), floor 22, the hospital in the tower.

"Okay, that's enough."

"Thank you very much."

——Fuu.

Taking a quiet deep breath, Monica let down the edge of her shirt that she'd been holding up.

"The swelling from the internal bleeding is also receding."

"It looks like the hot compress I received from you worked out well."

In front of the doctor who was scribbling away at her chart, she held her flank.

The battle at the Governmental Sector.

The wound she had sustained when fighting the clones that Golden Maha had summoned. When she received the blow, it had been enough to stop her breathing and even knock her unconscious, but it looked like the first-aid she'd received at the Governmental Sector had been good.

"……At first, I was wondering how many ribs had broken."

"That's because the muscle density around the ribs is thin. There's nothing to protect the bone so there are times when the pain is intense despite nothing having broken."

The old bespectacled doctor shrugged.

"So, how is it? Do you still feel pain?"

"……We took a break for the entirety of last evening so it's pretty much gone."

"That is great news. Then you wish to participate in training immediately starting from tomorrow?"

That's right. It had been three days since returning from the Governmental Sector. Commuting to the hospital like this every day was all for the sake of returning to training tomorrow.

"Hr—m, I recommend that you only do something like light running for the first day."

"What about practicing with a weapon?"

"I'll permit it if there's no opponent. It gets much harsher when facing somebody else. Well, I can tell that you will exercise discretion."

The old doctor smiled wryly with a steaming cup in hand.

"I'll say this again, but only practice swings, okay?"

"……Understood."

She was relieved. Practice swings and running……she originally wanted to move more for the sake of rehabilitation as well but having resolved first that training was out of the question, she couldn't voice such luxuries.

"Thank you very much."

Leaving that place, she continued down the hallway towards the elevator.

"……What should I do?"

Waiting for the elevator to arrive, Monica gazed absentmindedly at the corridor's window.

The weather was good so she'd finished off the laundry before coming. Cleaning her room……to begin with, her room was exceedingly empty so there was no need to clean it.

Like this, there was nothing to do when she returned to the residences.

It seemed that new Cadet Guards would often go on strolls in the tower. However, for she who had been living here since her time as an apprentice Priestess, going on a walk now was……

"……No, isn't that an excuse?"

Walking through every floor of the tower. Let's start from the bottom and go up in order. The goal will be the Priestesses' floors. Entry is restricted from regular visitors but Guards who are affiliated with the tower can access the elevator leading to the Priestesses' floors so there's no problem.

"I just thought of this while walking but that child also has faith."

It couldn't be helped that she'd be interested in Ymy's situation since yesterday. She hadn't appeared when the

time came to have the meeting with Cadres Guard Ishtar, and she didn't appear when the meeting ended either.

……The reason for that is that her training ran late?

……Would she fail in training after going as far as becoming a Priestess?

"Though really……it's not something I should speak about."

I wonder if I can advise her? She's my precious kouhai from when I was an apprentice Priestess. Ymy also cherishes me as her senpai even now.

"That's decided then."

Monica nodded persuasively and walked to the elevator.

Part 7

Floor 287 of the tower. Having followed Ymy, what awaited Sheltis outside the elevator was the Priestess floor belonging to Ymy.

"Sheltis……since I became a Priestess, there were four people that required purification and were carried over. Do you remember that?"

"Since I just heard it not too long ago."

It was something pertaining to others like him who were afflicted with mateki so there was no way he could forget.

"Then do you also remember their symptoms?"

"Eh? Ahh, umm, they were people that were under mind control and unconscious, and"

There was a patient that had necrosis occur due to the decaying effect of mateki. There was also a patient who had his or her blood color change because of the deadly poisonous effects of mateki. Both had left behind a bloodstain in the purification room.

"Ah, but……that doesn't match the number."

There were four altogether that had been brought before Ymy. One of them had mind control, one had necrosis and one had deadly poison. That was a total of three people. Then what about the last one?

"There's still one more person……there's a child whose mateki I couldn't purify."

At the windowsill of the giant stained glass.

Placing her delicate hand upon the silver window frame, the Priestess turned towards him.

"He is in a coma. There is no pain or bleeding. That child who won't wake no matter what anybody does is sleeping in the hospital within this tower. My shinryoku is probably……no, it should definitely be strong. However, that mateki's propagation speed is fast……for example, even if an entire division is purified, the remaining parts will replace it in that time."

"Think of it as an extremely hardy weed. Even if you cut the leafy part, as long as the roots remain underground, it'll grow again, right? It's the same as that."

"……That kind of mateki."

He had faced countless Yuugenshu during his time as an Elite Guard but he had never seen mateki like that.

"Then that's even more reason. Even if you say you failed the purification, it's the first time I've heard of mateki like that too so even for Priestesses, there's no way they would be able to immediately respond to it."

"But Sheltis, it's because they understand that that there are people who can't forgive Ymy. For example, friends of the one in a coma because of that mateki."

"Friends?"

"……Priestess Viola and her younger sister, Horn, were raised together with many children in an orphanage in the Third Living District."

Ymy was looking at something from beside the window.

That was the direction of the Third Living District which was the furthest from the tower.

"They left the orphanage and became a Priestess and Sennenshi and I've heard from Viola that they'd like to return the favor to the orphanage that raised them. They keep the bare minimum to live and give the entirety of their wages to the orphanage."

"……That Horn is?"

When he was an Elite Guard and before that, Sheltis had never been in a unit with Horn.

However he had heard about her outstanding ability and ruthless disposition that forsook others. To think, she could do that for somebody she didn't know?

"It seems that for Viola and Horn who were raised in an orphanage, those that receive the same treatment are the same as family to them. There's no way they could stay calm when their family is afflicted by the Yuugenshu's mateki……and the direction of that anger turned towards Ymy who couldn't purify that mateki."

"Horn-san is already disgusted that it's impossible for me though."

Ymy showed a dry self-deprecating smile.

"'*That's enough, I'll do it. I'll find that Yuugenshu and defeat it. When it's defeated, Tessha's mateki should be dispelled and this will all be resolved.*' That's why Horn-san goes out to patrol of her own accord……even though policing the Biotope is a job nobody really wants to do."

———Ahh, I see.

He finally understood why Ymy had wanted to try purifying his mateki.

"It sounds like Horn has returned. Eyriey said she saw her at the Living Districts."

"……Yeah."

The child named Tessha who was stuck in an endless coma.

She had been reminded of something because Horn, who was equivalent to family for that child, had returned to the tower. She had been reminded of the mateki of the Garden of Eden Corrupted Song which resided within her childhood friend's body and could not be purified by the Priestesses, just like that child.

……That child and I are overlapping within Ymy.

……So that's why she couldn't do nothing.

There were people whose mateki hadn't been purified. She felt only guilt because of that and thought that she must at least try purifying Sheltis' mateki.

"So the reason you were running late for the meeting yesterday really was Priestess training?"

"I just had them extend it as long as possible. Yours is also dangerous, but that child's mateki is really dangerous. Horn-san says……she'll defeat the Yuugenshu that caused this but that's worrisome. I think it's for the best that a Priestess purify it."

"Mm? It's not good to defeat it?"

The child named Tessha had fallen into a comatose state after being afflicted with mateki. If the Priestesses couldn't purify it, wouldn't it be fine if the main body of the mateki was defeated?

"*If the Yuugenshu is defeated, the mateki will disappear —— that is true in the majority of cases. But the death agony of a powerful Yuugenshu's mateki is strong. There are types where if the main body is defeated, their mateki will run out of control .*"

"We Priestesses call that '*delayed sin type*' mateki. '*S vector, eighth class*'……that's the common name of the Yuugenshu that Horn-san is chasing after but if it's a delayed sin type, then far from being cured, she'll get

worse……we also have to consider the effects it'll have on her life."

Delayed sin type mateki.

It was a rare mateki that Sheltis had only heard once or twice. If he hadn't heard the explanation from Ymy just now, he would've even forgotten it existed.

"……So there is that. But shouldn't Horn know about that?"

"Yeah. But she thinks that's the only option left."

Betting on the chance that it wasn't a delayed sin type, she would search for the S vector, eighth class hiding somewhere on this gigantic floating continent. It was an outrageous mortification like trying to find grains of salt in a desert.

Orbie Clar

"But if time passes, Ymy——"

You should continue to grow as you accumulate more experience and training: just before he said that.

Clack, ck……cla……

Footsteps resounded from the elevator and the emergency stairs at the same time. The owners of the footsteps came across each other at the passage's intersection and came to a stop.

"A Cadet Guard?"

"Ahh……g-good morning, Captain Horn!"

In contrast to the stifled voice was a voice shaking with nervousness.

……This voice is Monica?

……And somebody else; could it be the person Monica 's talking to is her?

"What business does a Cadet Guard have on a Priestess' floor?"

"R-Right. I have a report regarding the expedition to the Governmental Sector we traveled together on."

"……The Governmental Sector?"

With those few words.

Something sharp was mixed into her voice.

"You just spoke of the Governmental Sector. The one who accompanied Ymy Ele Soufflenictole to the Governmental Sector was you?"

"That ri……!"

Monica's voice paused. At the same time, it felt like she gulped. At the same time came the sound of a horribly shaky breath taken with anguish.

——What happened?

"Monica-senpai!?"

She who probably had the same thoughts as Ymy, clothed in her vestments, ran towards the intersection.

"*Sheltis.*"

"I know."

He ran down the corridor after Ymy and the two turned to the passage that continued on towards the intersection.

What laid before them there was —— in the center of the intersection, Monica had the barrel of a revolving handgun pressed up against her brow. [3]

"You can't even react to something of this level. To think that a Cadet Guard of this caliber would be chosen as an escort to the Governmental Sector."

"M-My apologies. It was……so sudden."

"Sudden? So you would say '*because it was sudden*' when attacked by a Yuugenshu."

"…….No."

"This is a level that can't even be discussed. In the end, Tenketsu (Sophia) Palace's Guards are just a gathering of riffraff."

Monica was downcast as she stayed silent. In contrast, Horn returned the handgun to the holder at her waist and sighed with disgust.

"Horn-san!?……What……are you doing!"

At the same time Ymy's footsteps rang out as she approached, the blinder-wearing Sennenshi turned to her .

"Ymy Ele Soufflenictole."

"You're comrades of this tower, aren't you!? Even so, you stuck a handgun up to her……what are you trying to do!"

"Comrade?"

The Sennenshi's voice became even more of a sneer with Ymy closing in on her with an angry look.

"It would fine if she was at least helpful in odd jobs, but this kind of hindrance isn't fit to be called a comrade. The Sennenshi, a portion of the Elite Guards and about a third of the apprentice Priestesses are passable. They have their uses. It's fine if the rest just maintain weapons in the corner at best."

"……Are you seriously saying that?"

"Seriously? You want me to say that I'd entrust my back to useless Guards? Then first, shall we try having a Priestess pick a Cadet Guard that's not her Sennenshi as a partner?"

Facing Ymy who was standing there dumbfounded, the tall gunner drew one step closer.

"Good timing; there's something I wanted to say to you."

"……What is it?"

The two were basically glaring at each other.

"It looks like you went to the Governmental Sector."

"……Is there something about that?"

"Hah! Aren't you being easygoing, going on a sightseeing trip without doing your Priestess training?"

"We had a goal. It was not a trip."

"Then you have some definite achievements."

"That……was not what the meeting this time was about, it was about the aforementioned——"

"The case with the attack by some third organization or something? I heard you let the ringleader boldly run away just before catching him."

Ymy bit her bottom lip.

"In the first place, you——"

"Hold it."

Interrupting Horn's words, Sheltis stood between her and Ymy.

"It's not good for there to be discord between Priestesses and Sennenshi. I've been listening until now but only you have a provocative tone."

Their lines of sight were at about the same height.

Looking on at her directly, the blinder-wearing woman wrinkled her brow.

"I was wondering who it was, but another Cadet Guard? Small fry, who are you mouthing——"

"Do you always speak like that?"

"……Always?"

"I can't understand how you deal with the Priestesses who are your colleagues and that Cadet Guard you placed a gun to with that hostility when you're all comrades of the same tower. Do you approach somebody dear to you with that tone too?"

"____"

With the same brazenly expressionless face, Horn's mouth tightened into a line for just an instant.

"What an audacious Cadet Guard. Protecting a Priestess, it's almost like you're under the delusion that you're a Sennenshi?"

"I simply stated what I thought. I wouldn't like there to be discord between a Priestess and Sennenshi."

"……Discord? Who would be friendly with a Priestess that can't even save a single child——"

"Horn? You should stop right around there."

The elevator's bell dinged at the same time a woman's voice was heard.

There stood a petite woman wearing a simple vestment consisting of a single piece of cloth.

"……Elder sister." [4]

The Sennenshi turned around nervously.

"Horn, I heard that Ymy-san is tired from continuous training. I don't know what you want to say but put an end to it already."

"……But elder sister!"

"The barrier transfer ceremony is approaching. The Queen will be able to complete her mission with the barrier and take three days of rest while the Priestesses support the barrier in her stead, you know?"

——Everything was contrasting.

Viola was not shaken no matter how much her younger sister strengthened her tone. Oh so quietly, her words permeated like waves upon water's surface.

"This time Syun-rei is in charge of it but even the Priestesses need to make preparations to make up for being shorthanded. Horn, do you intend to prevent Ymy-san from making those preparations?"

"……"

"Now, go back. We will not stay within the tower for long. We will be dropping by the orphanage as always tomorrow, right?"

"……Understood."

With a momentary sigh, Horn's heel struck the floor. Without a word, she started to turn to leave——

"Horn, what do you do when turning your back on someone?"

"……I'll be excusing myself."

The Sennenshi spat that out like a curse and left. Viola watched her disappear towards the elevator with a stern expression and then exhaled in an adorable manner.

"Fuu. I'm sorry, Ymy-san. You two there as well, did Horn perhaps say something rude?"

"Eh……n-no! I-I-I-I'm fine!"

Monica denied it in a great fluster when the conversation suddenly turned to her.

"Is that so? If she did, tell me and I'll have a word with her. ……Well then, I'll be excusing myself because I have training in the tower to undergo for the first time in a long while."

The third Priestess bowed deeply.

Watching her as she left with small steps befitting her short stature, Sheltis muttered with a sigh.

"They really are a contrasting pair of sisters."

The older sister would fix whatever was complicated by the younger sister who didn't trust people. The

younger sister understood that as well so her older sister was the only one that she couldn't oppose.

"……It's been like that since long ago. Viola's so wonderful and mature."

Maybe she'd been really nervous. Ymy drooped her stiffened shoulders, placed a hand to her chest and took repeated deep breaths.

"Monica-senpai as well, are you okay? Suddenly having a gun pressed up to you."

"Ahh……that really did surprise me but it's not like I was actually shot."

Rubbing her brow that had the gun pressed against it, Monica smiled wryly.

"By the way, Sheltis, why are you on the Priestess' floor?"

"Ah……"

"*Oh boy.*"

Machine Ilis crystal and Ymy both exclaimed at the same time.

"Did something happen?"

"N-No, see. U-U—mm……see, you said it as well. There was something to report about the Governmental Sector mission."

……There's no way I could talk about the real matter.

He couldn't say that he'd come to have his mateki purified. That he and Ymy were childhood friends…… was a truth only known to a handful of people so it wasn't something to be loose-lipped about.

"You too, Monica, what's up?"

"Me? I……well, it's about the same as yours."

Oh, that's unexpected. Just when I thought she'd answer concisely, her answer's lacking the usual clarity.

"R-Rather than that, Ymy."

"Yes?"

Ymy stared in wonder and inquired in response. Looking at her from the corner of her eyes, she who had been Ymy's senpai when she was an apprentice Priestess cleared her throat for some reason.

"W-Well……during the meeting, I heard from Cadres Guard Ishtar that your training was taking an unusually long time. Y-You know? I used to be an apprentice Priestess as well so it caught my interest."

"*Haha—n, I've figured it out.*"

Machine Ilis crystal sparkled.

"*So the senpai who's prone to worrying was worried about whether her cute kouhai was doing well and came to take a look .*"

"Ohh, so that's what it is, Monica. You're good at looking after people as always."

"Wha……! Y-You're wrong, Sheltis! What I had to say was just an extra in the end."

"*Again with that. Ah, your heart rate just shot up all at once?*"

"Kuu!? But I――"

"Monica-senpai!"

Monica was trying to take a step backwards when she was caught by Ymy whose eyes were shining.

"Senpai, is that true? You were worried about me?"

"N-No……well……you know, it's a given that a Guard worries about a Priestess."

The unit leader was mumbling her words.

……Well, it looks like this will end without me needing to think up a reason for why Ymy and I are together.

Secretly relieved, Sheltis walked towards the elevator.

"*Sheltis, Eyriey and Yuto might be coming to play around now.*"

"Ah, that's right, we have to hurry. Well then, Monica, see you tomorrow."

"Ah, h-hey, Sheltis, wait! I'm not done talking――!"

Part 8

"……What's this, it's awfully noisy outside."

Leon closed the book he was reading and stood up when he heard several voices coming from the hall.

This was floor 287 belonging to the Priestesses. A civilian wouldn't be able to enter and it was unthinkable for a Guard to cause such a commotion on a Priestess' floor.

So it the one causing this commotion Meimel? Or maybe it's Ran?

After he contemplated for a little while at that spot.

"……I'll leave it alone."

Leon opened the book he was reading again and sat back down.

It was a usual thing for Ran to shriek because of Meimel's pranks so he wouldn't want to add himself to the mix. And above all, there was somebody who would be anxious if he were to move from this spot right now.

"_____"

He looked down wordlessly at the table and there was a silent black-haired girl with her eyes shut in front of it.

……It's about time for the barrier transfer ceremony for Syun-rei.

……She's sure to be uneasy so I have to be by her side until then.

Normally, this would be the time when he would have a spar with somebody like Ran. Horn Nova had also returned to the tower after a long absence so he had wanted to spar with her but he had to hold back for a little while.

"……Leon."

"Mm?"

Silently gazing at her, the girl whose escort he worked as opened her eyes.

"……I'll make some tea. What do you want?"

In that case, I'll do it ——— he had reflexively gone to say that but pushed it back down when he got to his throat.

"Something a little more fragrant."

"……Okay."

She quietly headed to the kitchen.

……That's right.

……She'll be anxious if she's not doing anything. There would be no meaning to it if I did it in her stead.

With a smile on his face that had hints of wryness in it, Leon watched the girl's small back as she left.

Chapter 3 – Hard to Control

Part 1

"Eh-he-heh—, now then, Sheltis-kun, which one is it? Isn't it time for a decision?"

Eyriey held out two cards with a smile full across her face.

"*Sheltis, Sheltis, the left one is definitely 'The Demon Instructor (Wrong)'. I recommend that you pick the right card.*"

"But you know, Ilis? The left card has been The Demon Instructor (Wrong) eleven times in a row so I think this time the right one is The Demon Instructor (Wrong). Having The Demon Instructor (Wrong) on the left twelve times in a row is ……"

"*You've said almost the same thing ever since* 'Having the The Demon Instructor (Wrong) on the left two times in a row is……'."

"Shel-nii, do your best!"

While Yuto and machine crystal (Ilis) were holding their breaths.

"The left side is definitely correct this time. This one!"

He pulled the left side card of the two Eyriey was holding out with all the fighting spirit in his body. He timidly turned over the card and……

"……Geh. Instructor Yumelda."

"*See, see, that's why I said so.*"

It was a card game that had secretly spread amongst the Cadet Guards. Throwing out the The Demon (Wrong) Instructor card which had the whip-wielding Instructor Yumelda on it, Sheltis sighed for the twelfth time.

"……I lost again."

"Yippie—. This is Sheltis' twelfth time being last. Okay , just gotta update the records!"

Eyriey wrote the records of battle in a massive memo book.

"Shel-nii, you lost again?"

"That's right—. On the other hand, Yuto's strong—; you've been in first twelve times in a row now."

"Ehehe, Yuto's strong? Strong?"

Yuto rubbed her eyes from drowsiness with a smile across her face.

"*Ah, it's almost dawn.*"

"……Oh crap."

Narrowing his eyes at the clock's digital display, Sheltis let out a little exclamation.

They had started this card game with the three of them at dusk. It was already around ten hours ago that the game had started with Eyriey adding the condition of " We'll end it if you manage to win?". He'd lost twelve times in a row already since that……so when he realized it, it was already the next morning.

"Eyri-nee, Yuto's tired."

"Right—. Then I guess it's about time we head back since I have to work at the shop in the morning too."

Eyriey packed away the cards they'd used for the game, half-eaten candy, and some strange invention-like thing into her bag.

"Well then, that's that."

"Ah, Eyriey, hold on. Are you okay returning with just the two of you? If needed, I'll take you there."

He had asked Eyriey who was shouldering her bag to wait. Public order around Tenketsu Sophia Palace was guaranteed but there were hardly any people in the early morning so caution was required.

"See, there might be somebody like that purse snatcher you saw before."

"It's fine— it's fine—. I've already made defense goods so if anything happens, we'll fight them off with the powerful flamethrower or one hundred million volts stun gun meant for repelling perverts, okay?"

"……Try not to get caught red-handed for possession of dangerous articles."

"Got it, got it. Well then, we'll come tomorrow or some other time to play again. Shasa-chan said to come play after all."

"Tomorrow? To the tower?"

"Yeah, that's right, is there something about that?"

"Well look, today is……"

He pointed at the calendar on the table when Eyriey tilted her head.

"*It's the day of the barrier transfer ceremony. The day when the Queen relinquishes control over Hyouketsu Kyoukai to a Priestess. I think it's Syun-rei's turn this time.*"

"At the previous barrier transfer……you remember, the barrier was broken. Ever since then, even within the tower, security is strengthened during the barrier transfer. It seems that the Regular Guards take shifts patrolling the tower so even entering is difficult."

"Hohoh, is that so?"

But Eyriey still looked unconcerned and seemed to take something from his doubts.

"But Shasa-chan said it'd be fine if I showed them this card."

"Card? Ahh, this is a badge. It's the same as the mine ……"

The plate was shining silver. While looking at the contents carved on its surface, Sheltis stood stock still, even forgetting to breathe.

"……Eyriey."

"Mm?"

"Where did you get this?"

"Ehehe, it's amazing, right? Shasa-chan secretly gave me it."

"……Amazing……this is beyond that level."

The floor access carved into the badge was '*290*'.

Sophia

Of the 291 aboveground floors that Tenketsu Palace had, every floor except the highest one, '*Paradise*' —— the display meant that she could freely come and go to even floor 290 which belonged to the Queen.

……Even Elite Guards shouldn't be able to enter the Queen's floor.

……This card is above that?

To access the Queen's floor, the sole method should be the elevator inoperable to anyone other than those with the authority of a Priestess or Sennenshi. Even Cadres Guard Ishtar can't enter the Queen's floor alone. Yet why does Eyriey, a civilian, have such an authoritative badge?

"Eyriey, have you used this?"

"Not yet, why?"

"Nah……I'd like you to tell me if you can use this card . I'm a little interested in that Shasa person."

A clerk of the tower?

Could a simple clerk prepare this badge so easily?

"Ah— it's fine, it's fine! I wanted to introduce you to Shasa-chan anyway. She's really cute and nice so look forward to it! Then, see ya!"

"Ahh, wait, Eyriey ——……sheesh, she's really fast at these times."

He had no opportunity to call out to her. Looking at Eyriey who had grabbed Yuto's hand and was running like the wind, Sheltis relaxed his shoulders and folded his arms.

"……Shasa, huh. Was there somebody by that name amongst the tower's clerks?"

Part 2

The cold passageway returned to silence.

Ymy walked alone on the dim floor which was lit only by a faint night-light within the frozen air.

Floor 22 of the tower.

She did nothing but continue deeper into that floor which was a gigantic general medical facility.

Past the giant lobby was A ward which was for emergency outpatients.

Continuing further past that was B ward which was for treating heavily injured patients that had to be admitted.

Further past that was C ward was for treating those with serious, life-threatening conditions.

"……Okay."

In front of the steel doors that filled her vision, Ymy nodded largely with the intention of spurring herself on.

There was something carved on the door which shined dark grey —— a formal carved seal that gave off bluish white light. The last ward, D ward, which was isolated by shinryoku-infused doors lay beyond here.

"……"

She placed her hand to the sensor at the side of the door.

It happened soon after the faint shinryoku wavelength from her fingertips was read by a specialized device.

"Confirmation……regular link with the Shinryoku Theory Bureau……comparing……shinryoku waveform match……confirming……identified as the fifth Priestess, Ymy Ele Soufflenictole."

The doors opened in both directions with a stately sound.

……

……This is that kind of place.

Ceiling, floor, corridor.

There were formal carved seals applied to all of those. In the past, all the apprentice Priestesses had finished these by carving their shinryoku into the surfaces.

If not for that, it would be impossible to shelter patients contaminated with mateki. At any rate, if a

normal person were to touch a patient contaminated with mateki, they would be infected with the same mateki at that moment.

"……Umm."

She had last come here over half a year ago. Ever since she'd tasted her first setback as the Baptism Priestess, it had become a place she did not wish to visit on her own accord.

"D09, this is it."

She confirmed the room's name many times and timidly opened the door.

A pure white room —— the room's ceiling, floor and walls were painted completely in white. A single boy continued to sleep there while attached to an artificial breathing apparatus. It was a small boy who was not even ten yet.

"Good……morning."

There was no way a response would come. This boy had not opened his eyes even once since he was trapped in an eternal coma due to powerful mateki.

"……Sorry……the truth is, I wanted to come earlier."

She might have been able to visit during the breaks between Priestess training. But she couldn't. It would be miserable……she knew that her heart would only sink if she were to visit when she couldn't cure him of his mateki.

"? Huh, the vase……"

A vase of azure glass sat by the window side which had its white curtains fluttering. In it was a single flower.

……There was nothing like this the last time I visited.

Civilians were strictly forbidden from entering D ward . Even family were rarely allowed to meet the patient face-to-face. Then who exactly put this flower——

"Does it not suit me?"

"!"

She turned around in a panic at the voice of the person who dropped by without a hint that she was there.

"……Horn-san."

"I was wondering who would visit other than me."

The blinder-wearing Sennenshi leaned against the wall with her arms folded.

"What is this? Are you trying to atone?"

"……"

"If you have no business, then leave. You probably haven't come to say anything to Tessha."

……

……That's right, that might be true right now.

Holding her breath, she forced her words of rebuttal back down.

"You look like you want to say something."

"I won't speak it."

Turning her back on Horn, she faced the door.

There's no meaning in telling her that I know that. That wouldn't be enough to regain her lost confidence in me, nor would it cause this child to awaken.

"I will convey it to this child with my shinryoku……it will definitely be conveyed."

In that room after the fifth Priestess left.

"……What a joke."

Biting down on the corner of her lip, Horn muttered that with disdain.

"……A dream……hope is not something you should put into words so lightly."

As great as the sadness when hope is crushed and as deep as the despair when a dream is lost. In truth, not a single Priestess had been able to purify the mateki of this boy who continued to sleep.

……That's right: they can't.

It was mateki that had beaten her sister Viola and even the first Priestess, Elmeetia.

"——Tessha."

She placed a hand to the forehead of the boy who continued to have his eyelids shut. She would not be able to touch him either if not for her Guard formal wear.

"Wait for me, I will definitely save you."

She would find the Yuugenshu that commanded this mateki and subjugate it. She would find it even if it took months or years, and even if she had to traverse from one end of the floating Orbie Clar continent to the other.

"……It's time."

She glanced at the clock on the wall near the ceiling.

"Well then, Tessha, I'll be going to the orphanage. I'll make sure to greet everyone on your behalf as well."

Horn gently held the boy's hand then left the room.

Part 3

"Sheltis, are you awake? Will you answer me, Sheltis?"

His comrade's voice suddenly came from the communications device attached to the ceiling.

"……Fue? Kagura?"

He poked just his head out of the sheets from atop his bed. He shook his sleepy brain and looked at the clock even while rubbing his vacant eyes.

"Please at least let me sleep until it's time for training. ……Eyriey and Yuto were here not too long ago."

"Don't talk in your sleep and get up. I'll be coming to your room in five minutes so wash your face and get changed before then please."

"Eh, wai……wait, Kagura, at least fifteen minutes —— h-huh? Kagura? Kagura?"

"……"

The communications device clicked and went silent.

"……What was that?"

Raising his upper body off the body, Sheltis supported his head.

"Good morning, and what a nice morning it is."

"Morning. ……Though it's still really early."

3:27. Not even ten minutes had passed since Eyriey and Yuto had left. Thanks to that, even his plan of sleeping right up until it was time to train at four was coming to nothing.

"At any rate, it's something requiring immediate attention."

Kagura with the machine helmet worn low over her eyes was as usual, without a hint of sleepiness.

"……Kagura, weren't you not a morning person?"

"That's right. But I became wide awake after seeing that."

"That?"

"Yes, and I'll be borrowing your work desk for a bit."

Without waiting for an answer, she took up a position at his desk. Just when he wondered what she was doing, she reached out to the monitor and computer and started typing something quickly.

"That?"

"Yes, the famous agency terminal that's useless to us Guards."

Kagura typed in her own login ID and opened window after window. Even as he looked on from behind, he had no idea what was coming because he didn't recognize any of the windows.

"Sheltis, what I'm about to show you is an anonymous message left on the General Affairs Bureau and Tower Management Bureau's digital bulletin boards.

"What about it?"

Her fingers that were typing at a high speed stopped for an instant.

"I'll say this ahead of time……please be prepared."

Clack.

The instant she pushed the last key, all of the windows on the monitor vanished. In it's place appeared a single article upon a blue background.

"*To all of Tenketsu*[Sophia] *Palace——*"

"……It's addressed to everybody in Tenketsu[Sophia] Palace?"

He looked down lower with disinterest.

"*To all of Tenketsu*[Sophia] *Palace——*

I shall teach you a valuable secret.

A Yuugenshu has changed its form to that of a person and disguised itself as one of your Guards. In order to draw it out, I recommend exposing all the tower's Guards to the Priestesses' baptism spells."

An absurd amount of time was required for him to process what the message meant.

……It can't be that the Guard this message is indicating.

He could tell that his fingertips were shaking.

"……What……this kind of tasteless message."

Straining his voice, that was all he could say.

……Is this about me?

……Just who did this……who's trying to agitate the tower's unease?

"That's why I told you to prepare yourself."

Kagura nodded while lounging back on the chair.

"It was sent simultaneously to every one of these agency terminals. Right about now, the executives of the tower should be thinking it's a prank but they might change their minds."

"*Hmm, can I ask something? I should have realized it as well if they sent it to the agency terminals. Especially if it's related to the Guards, I regularly perform keyword checks.*"

Machine Ilis crystal blinked while not able to understand that one thing.

That was a given as machine Ilis crystal' sensors spread out to cover the entire electrical system. It would be strange for machine Ilis crystal not to notice something that Kagura did.

"By the way, it seems the Guard Regulations Institute ……in other words, the Guard Control Bureau received

this message late. If we consider that the Environmental Bureau and the Mechanical Bureau and the others received it at the same time, the chance that sending it to the Guard Control Bureau was delayed is high."

"……*I get it. My searches prioritize the Guard Regulations Institute first of all so I was late in discovering it because of that.*"

"Yes. In my case, I also hold the title of a computer researcher of the Tower Management Bureau. Thanks to logging in with my ID from there, I managed to be one of the first to read this message."

Kagura sighed after removing her machine helmet.

"I don't think there's any need to explain who this is talking about."

"……Yeah."

He didn't know who was behind it, but it was a sly tactic.

While asserting that it had changed forms to that of a Guard, it agitated their unease without revealing the Guard's name. Saying that they should expose

everybody to the Priestesses' baptism spells was also of the same type of method. This was basically saying to expose who this was in front of the surrounding Guards and Instructors.

"I'd just like to ask but what will happen if this actually gets implemented?"

"……It's not something I'd like to think much about."

Shinryoku was like deadly poison to his body which was afflicted with mateki.

If it was a Priestess-level baptism spell, even if Elbert Resonance did not occur, light wounds similar to burns would be received.

"As a silver lining, the tower's executives are also pretty much disregarding this message. There have been numerous messages received in the past that aimed to fan up the unease of the tower."

"……Is it okay if I have faith in that?"

"The basis for that is in who this message was addressed to."

Kagura nodded. She temporarily removed the window being displayed and continued on to open several windows at the same time.

"See, even if I search for it, it's only spits out red errors . Nobody within the tower or the Living Districts sent this."

"*It came from outside the floating continent; in other words, it's was sent remotely from somewhere in the floating archipelago.*"

"That's what it means. It would still carry credibility if it were from someone within the tower. However, how would somebody from outside the floating continent know information like there being a Yuugenshu who changed forms into a Guard when nobody within the tower knows? —— The executives are also thinking that; well, it is the appropriate conclusion."

"……From outside the floating continent, huh."

That would have to be how it is. There should be no way somebody from the floating archipelago which lay

outside of the floating continent would know that secret which only a handful of people knew. Anybody would think that way.

……Then that's even more reason.

……Who is it that knows my secret despite not being on the floating continent?

"Kagura and Ilis, do either of you know where in the floating archipelago this was sent from?"

"*……I'm trying my best but narrowing the scope to a certain extent is the utmost I can manage.*"

"Same here. It looks like it will be a harsh challenge. Of course the sender's name was also blank; basically, they're anonymous."

If that was what these two said, then he wouldn't receive a favorable response no matter who he asked.

"……Thank you, Kagura, it really helped me that you told me about this."

"Yes. But what will you do from now on? We have early morning training scheduled for today but will you fabricate some excuse and investigate?"

"No."

He shook his head at Kagura's idea and stood from his chair.

"It would like asking people to doubt me if I took a break immediately after this. I'll train normally and think about this after that's over."

"That would be the most natural. I will be keeping track of all the executives' movements so I'll inform you if something happens."

"I see. Understood……however, one thing."

He could feel Kagura's gaze through the eyeshade of her machine helmet.

"What is it?"

"You can ignore this case. I have a feeling that Monica will come to suspect your mateki someday. I believe it

would be best if you think about what you will say to her at that time."

"……"

He averted his eyes from the steady gaze of the Nell girl.

"……I'll think about that at a different time. I have to focus on training and this case for now."

It took his utmost to say just that.

Part 4

A rocky area with boulders large enough that one had to look up at them obstructed the way.

It was a high-difficult field that necessitated Running between the rocks on a path that wasn't a path and occasionally jumping from boulder to boulder.

"—is, —ltis."

Sweat trickled down his brow as he jumped from a large boulder to the next.

It had been dark when their early morning training started but now the sunlight coming from overhead was steadily raising the temperature.

"Sheltis, are you listening!?"

"……! Wawaa, wh-what? What is it?"

Sheltis finally came back to his senses after having his name called right next to his ear.

"It looks like you didn't hear me."

"……Sorry."

Sheesh —— Monica had a wry smile on as she ran beside him.

"It was about our next mission. I was asking if there was anything you wanted."

"……Then,"

While jumping down to the slanted boulder ahead.

"I've said it before but I'd like for us to gain experience in policing the Nature District and escorting VIPs. Since there are many missions like that after becoming Regular Guards."

"That's what I thought as well so I looked into it but both of those kinds of missions are out of stock."

"Darn, really?"

"I meant to talk about that earlier but I guess you weren't listening then either."

Monica went from having a bitter smile on her face to slightly narrowing her eyes.

"It's strange for you to be inattentive during training; did something happen?"

"Ah, no……I think I'm fine."

He couldn't say that he was helplessly interested in the anonymous message the tower had received.

……I don't like the feeling of it.

……This might be the first time I've been unable to concentrate on training this badly.

"About the missions, if those are the circumstances, then I'm fine with other missions. Those two are the important ones but it would be imbalanced if we didn't take any other missions at all……the Governmental Sector one was a little stressing so maybe we should take a more comfortable one next."

"*Ah, then maybe you should go for the night patrol shift?*"

The mission of taking shifts to patrol Tenketsu (Sophia) Palace's grounds —— when Cadet Guards were about to take on an important mission, that was one of the types of missions used to warm up. Even if it was night, it was within Tenketsu (Sophia) Palace's territory so there was hardly any danger and even if there was, Instructors and Regular Guards could rush over immediately.

"Yeah, it seems like we could start patrolling the tower even starting today."

"That's right but I've been hearing that there have been a lot of troublesome things even in patrolling the tower lately, you know? Criminals looking for a reaction

……there's a troublesome bunch looking to slip past the security and infiltrate the grounds. Did you see that tasteless message this morning?"

"When you say message……"

"The one about there being a Yuugenshu mixed in amongst the Guards, or did you not see it?"

"Ah, well……"

Having the question asked so forthrightly, he unintentionally was strained for words.

"……I saw it. Yeah."

"Right? Jeez, trying to make the Guards waver with that, there's a limit to how much they can try to make a fool of Tenketsu (Sophia) Palace."

While jumping from rock to rock, the indignant Monica raised a brow.

"……Monica, would you find it unpleasant if there really was someone like that?"

"Hm?"

"Um, well, how to say this, it's a little different from a Yuugenshu but……if there was someone amongst the Guards carrying mateki."

"? I don't really get it but nothing other than the Yuugenshu carry mateki, right? That shouldn't happen, but wouldn't it be dangerous if there was one in the tower?"

She had a confused expression.

Only Yuugenshu carried mateki. If the former apprentice Priestess were to say, her definition of a Yuugenshu would probably be "whether it possesses mateki or not".

In other words, he would also count as a Yuugenshu by her definition because he was endowed with mateki.

……That's right.

……Monica's reaction is definitely normal.

"Sheltis, were you perhaps seriously thinking about that message?"

"N-Nothing of the sort? But you know, I kinda wonder where that message was sent from."

"It seems like an investigation would happen should it pass a certain threshold, but I doubt it will happen for this. It's obvious to anyone at first glance that it's a nasty joke, after all. It's best to ignore those."

"……Yeah."

He relaxed his fist that he'd unconsciously clenched and took a deep breath. Renewing the stagnated air within his lungs, Sheltis jumped down from the final boulder.

"Whew, we're finally done."

Monica wiped off the large beads of sweat flowing endlessly off her and looked up at the sky.

"It will be noon soon so we'll end the morning part here. From 3 PM, we have a lecture at the meeting room so we'll gather there."

"Hmm? What about Kagura and Vaiel?"

"Over there."

The direction Monica pointed to —— the two of them were being chased around by the whip-wielding Instructor Yumelda.

"It looks like the Instructor is personally coaching them because they're normally absent from training. They said they'd be doing it until just before the unit battles so I don't think it will end for a little while yet."

"……I see."

"I was planning on heading to the cafeteria so would you like to join me for lunch?"

"Umm."

He nodded reflexively but swallowed his words in a hurry.

"Sorry……I have something to do. I apologize but I need to head back to my room once."

"Is that so?"

"Yeah, but I'll make sure to be at the meeting room. ——See you!"

Making a small wave with his hand, Sheltis ran straight along the paved road to Tenketsu Palace.

Sophia

Part 5

The impressive stained glass colorfully refracted the sun's rays shining down brilliantly.

The light and sound and, needless to say, the air of that place were serene —— a single female Guard trudged along in that floor serene with holiness.

"……Hr—m, this might be a probleeem."[5]

The second and third Priestesses. This floor was prepared for them as well as the Sennenshi guarding them and was reversed as holy ground by all the Guards and apprentice Priestesses.

To one day become the owner of this floor —— it was an place aspired towards for those aiming to become a Priestess or Sennenshi.

"Hr—m, hr—m, I wonder what was wrooong."

Nevertheless, there was not a trace of nervousness about the woman shouldering a large metal spear.

She spoke to herself with her arms folded and a frown on her face.

On this floor where other Guards would become unable to walk straight due to nerves, she continued as if she'd just been invited over to a dear friend's house.

"So the cause really is a dislike of vegetables? No, no, it might be the arrangement. ……Hr—m."

"You seem to be enjoying yourself, Ishtar-san."

A voice called out and stopped her.

She had flaxen hair and light brown eyes and wore a vestment crafted from a single cloth.

"Ah—, it's Viola-sama; we haven't contacted each other at allll."

"It has been a while. You seem as energetic as ever. I was wondering if you would be a Sennenshi the next time I returned to the tower."

"Ehehe, Ishtar is still inexperienced."

"Is that so? See, I heard that Ymy is still undecided on a Sennenshi."

"……Ahh, that's right."

A small laugh leaked out from the Guard's lips.

"Well, that's Ymy-sama's decision—. Her destiny, so to speak."

"That's true. By the way, are you dealing with a difficult issue? It's rare for you to make a troubled face so I ended up calling out to you."

"……Uu. That's actually riiight. I'm troubled about my little sister, I'sa-chan. Would you care to listen?"

The Cadres Guard drooped her shoulders with a heavy and dark expression.

"Yes. As a fellow older sister."

"Well then! I made omurice for my super precious I'sa-chan a little while ago for her lunch, okaaay."

"How wonderful. Ishtar-san, you truly care for your little sister."

"That's right—. But listen to this: I'sa-chan was happy up until I said I'd make her omurice……but she was suddenly in a bad mood when the time to eat came around and finally ended up bursting into tears."

"Oh my, my. Pardon my asking but how did it taste?"

Faced with Viola who was tilting her head, Ishtar shook her head largely from side to side.

"It was perfect—. At any rate, we've been together for over ten years. I have a clear understanding of what I'sa-chan prefers for taste and presentation."

"Oh dear, then it really is a difficult problem. I wonder if anything happened to worsen your little sister's mood."

"……Hr—m, I don't have any ideaaa."

Ishtar looked troubled to the core.

"Rather, to make her happy, I tried to feed her while saying, '*Here you go—, I'sa-chan. It's luuunch, it's deliciousss.*' Then I'sa-chan suddenly stood up and yelled '*Onee-sama, you idiooot*——' and ran away crying while still holding her spoon."

"……Well, that."

"Right? It's strange, right?"

"……I think it's because your sister is at the age of independence. You could say she's really sensitive."

"Is that sooo?"

"Yes, I as well……it's not something unrelated to me."

A shadow clouded the Priestess' eyes and she smiled a little bitterly.

"That's riiight, we're both troubled by our little sisters. But Horn-chan is strong, so I think she'll be fine no matter what happens, you knooow? I'sa-chan still can't fight a Yuugenshu alooone."

"Strength isn't limited to excellence."

"Yes, Ishtar is also of that opinion."

Her expression suddenly brightened and then.

"—Well then, **shall we switch topics to that**? **About Horn-chan**."

"……"

With those few words.

That wide floor returned to silence as if frozen.

"I knew it."

Her lips shaking with a giggle, the third Priestess didn't attempt to hide her smile.

"Ishtar-san really is Ishtar-san. There's no way you as the Cadres Guard came here for no reason. You had business with me from the start, didn't you?"

"Of course—. If not, I wouldn't be on this flooor; I'd be chasing I'sa-chan who ran off."

"……Ah, so the omurice story was true."

"……Though it's regrettable, it's true."

Bursting into laughter once when she saw the Cadres Guard sighing once more, Viola pointed in the direction of her room.

"Shall we speak in my room?"

"No, no, don't worry. I'm fine if we continue to stand while talking. The story about I'sa-chan was the longer one."

"It's scary if it's too short as well. Well then, let's continue."

"Yes. Come to think of it, a long time ago, Horn-chan wanted to search for some Yuugenshu. What was the individual name for that?"

"'*S vector, eight class*'. The only witnesses were…… children from the orphanage that went on a picnic. I'm told that it looked like a small black kitten when they first found it and enlarged when the children neared it,

then attacked them. We've also received information that when the Regular Guards that went to combat it thought they had defeated it, it would immediately regenerate."

"Hohhh hohhh, so if that was found, Horn-chan would fly out of the tower, ignoring orders from anybody."

"……"

"At that time, will Viola-sama be able to stop Horn-chan's rampage?"

Part 6

Tenketsu (Sophia) Palace, floor 11, Cadet Guard residences.

"……It's scary seeing this."

Returning to his room, Sheltis booted up the agency terminal at his work desk.

He entered in his member ID that was carved into his badge and windows popped up rapidly on the monitor. Finally, his fingers that were operating the keys came to a stop at the screen showing the mail.

Received mail '*1*'

Sender ' '

"*To all of Tenketsu Palace*[*Sophia*]*——*

I shall teach you a valuable secret.

A Yuugenshu has changed its form to that of a person and disguised itself as one of your Guards. In order to draw it out, I recommend exposing all the tower's Guards to the Priestesses' baptism spells."

"One message received and the sender is unknown… …this is it."

"Yes, it's the same as the message Kagura showed you. It really did arrive later than hers. Though the motive for that in unknown."

"……No developments; that's a relief."

He breathed a sigh of relief as he relaxed.

If a second message had been sent while he was training and the name of the corresponding Guard were written —— he had only avoided that worst-case scenario.

"Even putting the Priestesses' baptism spells aside, starting with Ymy, Meimel and Syun-rei are also aware of you. If it comes to it, you should be able to deceive the others with their assistance."

"……But we can't solve the root of the problem like that."

The sender was somebody outside of the floating continent, meaning they were somewhere on the distant floating archipelago. But that sender's name was blank. It was the same as having nary a clue.

Orbie Clar

Lagoon

Orbie Clar

……Somebody outside of the floating continent who knows of me?

……The Governmental Sector? No, even within the Governmental Sector, there shouldn't be anybody this well-informed.

"I wonder if my weakness has been grasped."

"*As long as your opponent's identity remains unspecified, this will be a one-sided defensive battle.*"

With his weakness in hand, the other party might come to him with negotiations. It was like grabbing at clouds but he also required information on the opponent.

"*I'll do my best and it seems like Kagura will also render assistance.*"

"Thanks. I'd also like to think of somebody likely but the message is written like this and the name is also a blank space……blank, ……blank……space?"

……Blank?

What is this……nagging feeling?

Something……maybe I……am overlooking something really important?

"*What's wro——*"

"Wait!……I need to concentrate."

He even stopped breathing as he focused on thinking.

There was no name attached to the mail. It was a blank field without a single character written in it. But what if the fact that there is no name is the most important part of this message?

……Blank……blank……empty……that basically means bla……bla……nk."[6]

……**There is someone**.

"*Hey, Sheltis, I've been awaiting the time we would meet in this world.*"

There was just one person. A person who identified themselves as '*Blank*[Igun-I]'.

The assassin from the unnamed third organization that attacked the Governmental Sector together with Golden[Maha]. He had confronted him at the floor where Mikuva's Crimson Eye shone, that pitch black——

"……Igun-I."

"*Eh?*"

"Ilis, you should remember as well, about that creepy guy we met at the Governmental Sector. He was looking down at us from atop the '*Crimson Eye*' and, in the end, said he had been waiting for me and wanted to meet me."

"*He called himself Blank*[Igun-I]*……ahh, I get it. It's the type of joke that I'm not good with. ……But I wonder if it's really that person. Is there some kind of proof to confirm this?*"

"There's no proof; it's really just intuition."

But he could feel it.

This commotion within him like shivers was telling him that his intuition was correct.

"Chase me if you want to know the truth. Now, Sheltis, please chase after me. That will be the beginning of everything."

……The beginning of everything.

……What awaits me after I chase him?

"Is this to lure me out?"

"It's a problem that we can't say you're over-thinking things. Truthfully, I also have my doubts about that person. I'm curious as to who he is."

"You're also interested?"

"Yes. The truth is, that person, that was my——"

Immediately after.

The crystal portion that was shining brilliantly in blue lost its light and changed to a dark grey.

"Mm?"

"……No, I won't say. It's too much to say for a guess. At any rate, pinning down the enemy's objective is a silver lining. We may be able to figure out a countermeasure so it's most important."

He clenched his fist atop his lap.

And——

"Oh?"

Machine Ilis crystal who had lowered the intensity of her light flashed once again.

"Hey, hey, Sheltis, an urgent mission is being announced by the Guard Regulations Institute. The location is the Biotope's S vector section……on the bank of a large salt lake. The nearest patrolling unit of Regular Guards is performing an emergency response so they wish for the Cadet Guards to also participate as a supporting unit."

"It's by the Instructor's recommendation so there's a chance we might be called."

It was the same as the time the Regular Guard unit was wiped out by Golden Maha. The primary force would be Elite Guards and Regular Guards and Cadet Guards recommended by the Instructor would act as support for them.

"What are the mission details?"

"*It's the subjugation of a Yuugenshu. It broke through the encirclement……no……but this is……?*"

Separating from her momentary silence, machine (Ilis) crystal continued.

"*There was a previous report about this Yuugenshu being sighted. Please wait a moment, I will retrieve the information from Tenketsu (Sophia) Palace's Yuugenshu list.*"

"……It's a strong one."

It was no coincidence that it had escaped once in the past and broken through the encirclement this time.

There was a high chance that it possessed a special type of mateki or exceedingly powerful mateki. To kill it for certain, two or three Regular Guard units would be required for a medium-sized one and three for a large-sized one.

"____"

He held fast to his card-shaped badge that shined silver. An order to gather from the Instructor might be sent to this badge at any time.

……If it's a strong Yuugenshu, two or three Cadet Guard units might be necessary.

……Maybe Monica's badge has already been contacted at this time?

"Ilis, how is the retrieval?"

"I just finished the comparison of the entire list, or in other words, the verification checks. The result of a comparison with Tenketsu(Sophia) *Palace's list yielded one full match. ……But this is troublesome."*

"The Yuugenshu?"

"Yes. You remember the area I said that the Yuugenshu was found in?"

"A large salt lake. You said it was in the Biotope's S vector section――"

*"We Priestesses call that '*delayed sin type*' mateki. 'S* vector, eighth class*'……that's the common name of the Yuugenshu that Horn-san is chasing after."*

……The Yuugenshu Ymy had told him about that time .

"It can't be."

The reason machine (Ilis) crystal said it was troublesome.

……The one Tenketsu (Sophia) Palace is chasing after now is the one Horn is chasing after?

……In that case, this is bad.

"If somebody is afflicted with that one's mateki――"

"Yes. It is mateki that cannot be purified even with the power of the Priestesses. Before victims appear amongst the Guards, swift subjugation of the Yuugenshu is necessary. In the worst case scenario, we will need to tell Ymy."

The problem was Horn Nova.

She should have also received this information. She should be desiring a one-on-one conclusive battle with that Yuugenshu. But even for a Sennenshi like her, fighting a Yuugenshu whose mateki even a Priestess couldn't purify while not in a calm state was too dangerous.

"……Ilis. Tell Monica to get ready to head out at once."

He stood up without turning off the terminal.

He once again put on the jacket he had taken off and fastened the holders at his belt.

……I'll leave the thing with Igun-I until later.

……This takes priority.

"Are you heading out?"

"I'll head to floor 288 first; we need to stop Horn if she's planning on running off ahead alone."

Part 7

The third Living District.

Orbie Clar

On the floating continent, it was the section that boasted the largest area of those which were inhabitable. The first Living District had Tenketsu Palace at its center so the primary residents were Guards of the tower or clerks that worked there. The second Living District was a commercial area with many varieties of shops lined up. Compared with those, this was more of a quiet area with houses.

Sophia

"It's been a while since I walked down this road."

The intersection was dyed with the brilliant yellow colors of autumn.

Laying here and there along the road were flower beds made with brick and even now, kindergarten children were enthusiastically tending to them.

"……Time flows differently here compared to the tower."

The fragrance of the flowers made him want to stop without thinking. In that place.

Pressing down on her chest at the nostalgic scene that hadn't changed one bit since she had been raised here, Horn smiled without realizing it.

"……I wonder if everyone's doing well."

In the third Living District, there was an orphanage near Minamitoori Park.

Children without relatives, children who had been entrusted to them by busy parents, children who could not open their hearts to the those around them in kindergarten or elementary school —— they were everywhere but this was a facility that gathered up those children who needed a helping hand. It was a place akin to her family's residence.

"……"

In response to her high spirits, her steps quickened.

Advancing straight through the intersection filled with summer breezes and immediately after cutting left at the corner with conspicuous giant fir trees lined up, a building whose special trait was its fully white triangular roof leapt into her line of sight.

"——That's right. They'll be frightened if I wear this."

She put her hands behind her head and unfastened the tightly bound knot.

The blinder fell with a swishing sound.

"……On the other hand, it's hard on me without this."

She looked down at the blindfold that had fallen onto her palm and smiled wryly.

A blurred world.

The blinder, her palm, the surrounding trees, the building; everything had two images.

The territorial type shinryoku spell that the sisters, Horn and Viola, possessed inherently —— it was a side effect of the power called '*Celestial Map Drawing*'.

That was the power to see just slightly into the future.

It made shooting after reading where the opponent would dodge to possible and could be called a Heavenly blessing for a gunner. However, at the same time, the fact that she couldn't control it herself was a weakness. Because the world of the present she saw with her own eyes and the world of the future shown by '*Celestial Map Drawing*' would overlap and blur, if she continued to view both, her brain would be unable to keep up and she would experience dizziness.

……Since I was born.

……Because I'm different from nee-san.

Her older sister Viola had acquired the technique for controlling '*Celestial Map Drawing*' as she piled on training as an apprentice Priestess. For she who could not do that, she was still using this blinder. By blocking off the world seen by her eyes and viewing only the world of the future from '*Celestial Map Drawing*', she was somehow able to keep her brain's fatigue to a minimum.

"Well, it can't be helped."

She could feel some dizziness from just removing the blinder but she was meeting with the children again for the first time in a while.

Still holding onto the blindfold, she walked closer to the orphanage's gate——

"Ah, nee-chan!"

"Ain't this Horn-nee-chan, hasn't it been so long!?"

The kids who were in front of the orphanage's fence opened the gate in high spirits and ran over.

"Hey, hey, where did you go this time? Did you fight with a dragon again?"

"The same place as always. I didn't fight with an earth dragon but I did find a wyvern nest. See, I came here with pictures of it."

"Hey, hey, Horn-nee-chan! I baked cookies yesterday. I'll share some with you."

"Thank you, Nachez, but you worked hard to make these cookies so you should share them with everyone."

Even in the time was petting the girl's head, kids appeared one after the other.

Children that tugged on her clothes and children that hopped up on her back. There were likely more than thirty of them altogether and each of them was running over with a full smile.

"Oh my, I was wondering who it was with all these joyful shouts."

Following the multitude of children, an elderly woman walked over slowly from inside the building.

"It has been a while since we last talked, Matron. You seem well."

Standing up, she bowed.

——If somebody from Tenketsu (Sophia) Palace saw this, they'd doubt their eyes.

A Sennenshi who held a top position in the tower and moreover, that Horn Nova, taking such a low profile and

even coming into contact with somebody with a smile was a scene that not a single one had seen.

"To be honest, I was worried. I heard that the Yuugenshu invasion had also reached here. Was there any damage done?"

The day all those living upon the floating continent Orbie Clar feared.

The day Hyouketsu Kyoukai was broken and an unprecedented large-scale invasion was carried out by the Yuugenshu. She had heard that this orphanage had also been attacked and corroded by mateki.

"Of course we are all fine; we all evacuated to the shelters."

"What about the mateki? Was the decaying okay?"

"……The decaying was horrible. The gate was broken and the interior was corroded by mateki to tatters. …… Just for that moment, I wondered if it was the end for this place."

Perhaps she was remembering that time because the Matron's expression turned rigid.

Sophia

"……My apologies. Tenketsu Palace's power was not enough."

"It's not your fault. And besides, now it's back to as it was before. Hasn't even the mateki been cleanly purified ?"

The Matron of the orphanage's reaction was slackened as she pointed with a cheerful gaze.

"Yes. It has been wonderfully purified."

There would be traces leftover even after purification when corrosion occurred through powerful mateki. But no such traces were here in this park. The fence, gate and ground's curses had been completely purified. The one who had performed the purification had done a good job .

"A good apprentice Priestess came here."

"It was a Priestess."[7]

"A Priestess spent the entire night going around this area and purifying it. Even though she was so young, she passed the night without taking a break. She even talked to each of the children."

"……Who was this?"

"It was Ymy-sama. I hear that she's known as the Baptism Priestess and she certainly lived up to it."

"……Is that so."

A bitter taste was mixed into her mouth.

"Oh my, what's wrong?"

"……It's nothing; I was just thinking that I'm glad you're all safe."

"Of course, and that's all thanks to you sisters as well."

The Matron hugged the children clinging to her.

"This orphanage……we might not have been able to rebuild it without your assistance. I truly am thankful."

"I am glad if we could repay even a single portion of our gratitude for your raising us. Nee-san and I are both pupils of this orphanage, after all."

"Amazing—! Horn-nee-chan's like a man!? Nee-chan, aren't you actually a guy!?"

"……Do you want to get dropped from there, Ragna-kun?"

"Uwaa, i-it was just a little joke, nee-chan. Hey, hey, if I enter '*Sophia*' like nee-chan and work hard, can I become strong?"

"Yeah, definitely———"

"*Do you corner somebody dear to you with that tone too?*"

An instant.

The words of the Cadet Guard that had criticized her at Tenketsu Palace ran through the back of her mind.

Sophia

……

……What was that? Why would I remember that at this time?

Even though normally she wouldn't remember the words of a riffraff Cadet Guard like that, much less react to it.

"*Err……umm, I was fascinated by how amazing Captain Horn is.*"

"*I……If I practice, will I be able to become like the Captain ____*"

……I see, that time.

It may have been because she had a similar conversation before that Cadet Guard said that to her. The conversation she had exchanged with the maintenance officer boy when she had entrusted him with the guns' maintenance.

……What was my reply to Catria at that time?

"*Discard pointless thoughts.*"

"I don't need unskilled people in my unit. If you're going to subject yourself to techniques unsuited for your height, leave my unit before the end of today."

"_____"

"? Nee-chan, what's wrong?"

"……No, I'm fine. Rather than that, you shouldn't join Tenketsu Palace like me——"

Sophia

"Ohh, that's it! I also want to enter that biiig tower. Think I can do it? Can I also beat dragons and Yuugenshu going bang bang?"

"……"

She couldn't find words for the boy whose eyes were filled with hope as he asked.

"Do you corner somebody dear to you with that tone too?"

……That's different; this is……something like a child's simplistic dream.

It's different from awakening somebody who was already a member of Tenketsu Palace (Sophia) to the truth. This and yesterday are completely different matters.

"Nee-chan?"

"……You can. If it's you, then definitely, Ragna."

The words she spoke were quiet and clumsy to the point of being hoarse.

……How annoying, really annoying.

……Why am I being disturbed by that Cadet Guards few words like this?

Was it because it hit the mark? No, like I……can accept that. Tenketsu Palace (Sophia)'s bunch are all useless. They always can't do anything without grouping up with somebody.

I am……nee-san and I are different.

Her family and comrades were only the children born and raised in this orphanage. Believing that, she had lived without relying on anybody from Tenketsu Palace.Sophia

"……Horn?"

"Ah, no, it's nothing, Matron. ——That's right, I brought souvenirs. In the second Living District, a former colleague is running an open-air cafe. It seems like the cakes there are somewhat famous. Over there."

She pointed towards a large box sitting on the bench behind her.

"Oh my, I'm happy; we'll eat it during snack time."

"Okay. By the way……"

Just before she spoke, the transmissions device hidden at her chest vibrated. Mail? If it was a call, it's set to vibrate more. If it's this faint, then it's probably mail.

"Excuse me, I think it's probably from nee-sama."

On the screen of the transmissions device was the brief label '*Tower*'.

——A simultaneous transmission from the Guard Regulation Institute?……It can't be an emergency response at this time.

"*Subjugation list match, in combat with the individual 'S* Vector, Eighth Class*'.*"

When she first saw that name written there, she didn't believe it.

Her sworn enemy she had spent many years searching for. It was the name of the one who had sent a child of the orphanage to the hospital. That it would appear with this timing of all times.

"……The Biotope's S Vector?"

It couldn't be called anything but ironic.

That was where that Yuugenshu had first been witnessed.

……It appeared just after I returned to the tower.

……Does it intend to ridicule me?

"Matron, my apologies but urgent business has come up so I will be excusing myself."

"Is that so? It must be hard on you; you always patrol a troublesome place, don't you?"

"For next time, let's see. I'll come to play when I find enough time to leisurely eat candy with everyone."

Then Horn turned her back on her large family. She once again covered her vision with the blinder that had been hidden and looked only at the future world bestowed by '*Celestial Map Drawing*'.

"——Together with Tessha."

Towards the tower that stood out high in the sky.

Without turning back, the Sennenshi walked off in the direction of the tower.

Intermission – The Lords of Unusual Books

……

……Heh heh.

……Haha, ahaha……fufuu.

The overlapping laughter of children.

"Hey, hey, Igun-I, is this okay? Mission complete."

"Yeah, mission complete."

The small room had a sweet fragrance floating within it.

In the small room devoid of light bulbs, the only thing that could be called illumination was the moonlight coming through the window.

"Neue and Neosis, good work. I'm bad with machines so you really helped me out."

"It's simple, you just have to memorize it."

"*Yup, just memorize it.*"

Two child's voices echoed in the room. But the owners of those voices were nowhere to be seen in the room. Only the voices were resounding as if emerging.

"Unfortunately, people have things they're good at and things they're not, you know?"

A tall, lean young man with a brimmed hat worn as far as his eyes answered with a smile.

He wore a black hat, black suit and black shoes. Amidst the clothes which were a uniform jet black, pale blond which peeked through black hair was fluttering in the wind.

"*Igun-I is terrible with machines to a surprising degree.*"

"*Yeah, he even does the laundry by hand instead of using a machine.*"

"But you know, you two, it's kinder on your laundry to do it by hand."

The laughter resounded once again.

"You should share that kindness with the person from Tenketsu Palace."

"Yeah, you should share it."

"Yeah, it's pitiful being teased by Igun-I. Around now, he should be fearful."

"It's precisely because I like him very much."

Grabbing a very bright red strawberry, the man known as Igun-I deepened his smile.

"I'd be happy if he realized who it was. I can't help enjoying wondering if he'll come to meet me quickly."

"Fu—n. That's right, you're kind to us."

"Yeah, you're kind. Because you're kind, the promised——"

"Worry not. It'll be done once I decorate it with strawberries like this. ……There's just one thing. The truth is there were many times more strawberries than this but they were eaten by Natraja-san."

The Lord of Unusual Books drooped his shoulders as if there was no greater disappointment than this.

"*Eh—, agaaain?*"

"*You know, Noesis, that's called* '食い逃げ'*. It's the natural enemy of girls so if you do it too much, you become fat.*"

"Oh my, who will grow fat?"

In an instant, the dim room was dyed bright red.

It was a '*brilliant red*' more red than the ripened strawberries. The lights that painted everything red lit up in the air one after the other with a fwoom sound.

"If it isn't Natraja-san, have you finished your job at the Governmental Sector?"

"Being a secretary is a monotonous job. Communications investigations and communications investigations. And today was the day I accompany a

member of the parliament for sake……which I ignored and came back here instead. When I was asked for a reason, it felt like I would say *'It's because I'm a spy so sorry ♪'*."

A woman appeared in the room without a sound.

"But Natraja-san, don't you like sake? I think you would have been fine accompanying that person for sake ."

"Drinking sake is highly situational. I like drinking with just two in a quiet place. I hate looking at groups that just drink sloppily."

The woman called Natraja raised an empty glass with her snow-white fingers.

"Hey, Igun-I, is the cake still not done? I want to eat it as well."

"Then Natraja-san, would you also help with the decorating?"

"Oh my, didn't I help with baking it? Though I got the heat a little wrong and scorched it a bit."

The woman smiled with her glossy lips touching the empty glass. Still in that posture, she reached one hand out to Igun-I's black hat——

"Goodness. If that hadn't happened, I wouldn't have had to redo this."

Just before that hand touched the hat, Igun-I pressed down firmly on it.

"By the way, about what you were talking about, did you ask the twins to do something?"

"*He did, he did; we sent a message to the floating continent's Tenketsu Palace*."

"*Yeah, he requested it. We sent a message.*"

Right—, agreed the two voices in sync.

"It was a minor matter. I wanted to trouble my beloved person. But if it wasn't done well, the message would have a record left, right? That's why I asked the twins. It would be nice if he were to realize it was me."

"You have quite the hobby there. While I was working seriously, you were playing innocent."

The woman returned the glass to the table and sighed.

"This place has been discovered by the Governmental Sector."

"Oh dear."

There was not a hint of wavering from Igun-I who continued to decorate the cake with strawberries.

"The Ninth of the aforementioned '*Heaven's Wheel*'——"

"So it seems. It looks like this place was located with that '*Crimson Eye*' before you and Maha gained control of Mikuva's Crimson Eye. As expected, there are people that can use their heads well."

"Fumu, and what is our response? What did the First say?"

"Nothing."

Her response was simple.

"He was in the middle of training as always so he didn't say anything. From the air about him, I would guess '

How about you face them appropriately and turn the tables on them?'"

"I haven't seen the First -san do anything other than train."

"Right—……even though it'd be okay to accompany me for sake sometimes."

She gazed seemingly reproachfully at the transparent glass.

"Come now, how about you invite the Third sometimes?"

"No. What would I talk about with just the two of us? It's the same as having an ornament for my partner. —— Well, the organization is on their way so I'll have fun with them. I'd be happy if a wonderful gentleman were to come."

She carefully picked out a strawberry decorating the cake and popped it into her mouth.

"A wonderful gentleman like who?"

"Look, isn't there a Sennenshi that wields a great sword? Umm……I think it was Leon. He's supposed to look exactly like that person. Igun-I, you saw him at the floating archipelago , right?"

"Yes. They really are spitting images of each other. It's an exact resemblance. They both wield great swords and the way he holds the great sword is also the exact same as the First -san."

"I'm looking forward to it even more. Ahh, I'm looking forward to it; I'll need to service him magnificently."

Her bewitching lips curved up and she sighed charmingly.

"Fifth , Sixth , stop your training and group up as well. " [8]

"O—kay. Isn't that great, Noel, that we get to skip training?"

"Yeah, that's great, Noesis."

"I'm looking forward to it……I wonder if Sheltis will come."

"Mm? Did you say something?"

In response to the woman with good hearing.

"No. No—t a thing."

Answering with a pure smile, Igun-I once again closed his mouth.

Final Chapter – That Which is Worth Betting Everything on ——Crystal World——

Part 1

All individuals —— make preparations and be on standby for an urgent mission from the executives.

Tenketsu Palace (Sophia), floor 11.

The Cadet Guard residences were filled with nervousness because of the proclamation from the Guard Regulation Institute.

"An urgent mission announcement, huuuh. Ain't there some more suitable unit other than us for that kind of exaggerated thing? We're a newbie unit that's only completed one mission since we formed."

"That's for the Instructor to decide. The opponent is a Yuugenshu so the main force will be Regular Guards and the Cadet Guards shall act as support. Depending on the details, we might be recommended by the Instructor."

Vaiel advanced down the hallway quickly and just behind him was Kagura.

A recommendation from the Instructor —— in the case of a large mission for units of Regular Guards or above, Cadet Guards were chosen as support for them.

"Support, huuuh. I'll pass on participating in that kind of pain-in-the-ass cooperation."

"This is my opinion, but I don't think we need to worry about that."

Kagura said that while confirming something on the floating Machine (Machina) pearl's screen.

"If we are recommended by the Instructor, it will not be for communications coordination or as a medical squad but as a direct addition to the Regular Guards' unit. In other words, a Yuugenshu battle mission."

"Wha……like hell there's support like that! Ain't that why it's a Regular Guard job?"

"It's rare but there have been cases of orders like that being handed down. On the other hand, there is no chance of us being called out for any missions other than that."

Units each had their own specialties. Taking that into consideration and recommending the unit most suited to a necessary support mission was the duty of the Instructor.

"Other units cover coordination and medical issues and there was a deciding battle for determining which unit would participate in the expedition to the Governmental Sector, right? In that decisive battle, Nash's unit should have been exceedingly above us. Because they have a wealth of experience."

"……What a hapless recommendation."

Holding onto his blue steel Iron Fist Protector's , Vaiel looked tired to the core.

"In exchange for that, the merit points are high. Though there's still hope as long as you're alive."

"And where's the all-important captain?"

"Already on standby. It's just that they said they'd be taking a detour, so I assume they'll arrive after that's done with."

"A detour? They're damned relaxed for being on standby. Just where did they take this detour?"

Kagura pointed at the ceiling in response to Vaiel's stunned expression.

"Floor 288, the floor of the second and third Priestesses."

Part 2

Sophia
Tenketsu Palace floor 287, emergency stairs.

"Sheltis!? You said to follow you but you've just been running along the emergency stairs this whole time."

"Sorry, Monica, just hurry! We'll talk later!"

The space was dimly lit by only the emergency lighting. The pair's footsteps continued to echo in the emergency stairwell which was filled with cold air.

"You said floor 288, so Meimel-sama and Viola-sama's floor?"

"That's right, but those two aren't who we're aiming for."

"Eh?"

"……Horn Nova."

The blinder-wearing Ex Machina. She was versed in using every gun and a shooter who was overshadowed by nobody in sniping long distance targets.

"I don't understand where you're going with this!?"

"I'll explain later so just follow me for now!"

A badge's ID was necessary to activate the elevator specifically for the Priestess floors. If they used the

elevator now, it would become apparent that they were ignoring the standby order from the Guard Regulations Institute.

——Echoing footsteps.

Running up the winding stairs, he jumped over the last step. He pried open the door before his eyes……

"Just how much will you get in my way……Ymy Ele Soufflenictole!"

Floor 288 lay beyond the door.

When he took one step in, what Sheltis saw was —— Horn who was facing the elevator which led to the surface floor and Ymy who stood before her.

"Get out of the way and disappear from my sight."

"……No. I cannot allow you to go alone. You should know just how fearsome the Yuugenshu you are pursuing now is."

"Are you saying that while knowing that I'm a Sennenshi? Are you saying that a Sennenshi is inferior to a single Yuugenshu?"

"This is not a discussion about being inferior or not. It is because you are a Sennenshi that you should uphold the rules more than anyone else."

The Priestess held both hands out and obstructed the Sennenshi.

Even while being pierced by Horn's gaze as she approached menacingly, Ymy resolutely remained in that spot.

"A Sennenshi is a Priestess' partner. While Viola is within the tower, it is your duty to be accompany her."

"A Yuugenshu has appeared and it is also a Sennenshi's duty to defeat it."

"Then please take along your unit. ……When Hyouketsu Kyoukai was broken, you, Ran, Leon and the others did that when holding them back. You absolutely did not fight alone."

"The situation is different. The opponent is only a single Yuugenshu. Rather than waiting for my

subordinates to gather, I will handle it myself. It is my decision as the captain so there are no problems with tower regulations."

"I'm saying that I'm afraid of how you think of it as ' only a single Yuugenshu'."

Ymy continued while staring at Horn without blinking .

"……I have experienced it first-hand, so I can say this. There are really Yuugenshu that cannot be opposed with the strength of a person. It is too dangerous to underestimate the Yuugenshu."

"Then are you underestimating the Sennenshi?"

The Sennenshi went past anger and sighed.

"For a Priestess who should be the one that most trusts the Sennenshi to make light of them like this."

"You're wrong. I——"

He looked on at that scene while pressed up near the emergency door.

"Sheltis."

"……I know."

Clenching his right hand to the point of whiteness, Sheltis nodded with his breathing ragged.

……I know. This isn't an argument that a Cadet Guard like me can go out and stop.

He and Monica were no more than ten metres away from Ymy and Horn. Even with her back turned, Horn should have noticed them and Ymy was facing them so she must have seen them.

……But from their points of view, we're not related to this.

A Priestess and Sennenshi were seriously clashing opinions. This was not something that would be resolved by a third party like himself or Monica interjecting.

But. Just before that.

"……That's enough, Ymy Ele Soufflenictole."

Horn's air of intimidation expanded explosively. The feelings mixed into each word had surpassed anger and were close to hatred.

"Don't go? Don't chase it? Don't underestimate Yuugenshu? Who are you to say these things?"

"!"

Horn reached out to Ymy's collar and tugged her face closer like that.

"To begin with, you and Tessha……"

"That's right."

Even with her vestments being grabbed, Ymy's words didn't stop.

"It would not have come to this if I could have purified that child's mateki. That my words would not reach you because of that……I was prepared."

……Normally……no, really, Monica and I.

……We might have jumped out when Ymy was grabbed.

The reason Sheltis and Monica had not done so and continued to stand there was because Ymy was nothing but resolved.

Even while being held by the collar and showered with harsh words, the Priestess was not wavering.

"I've also been doing my best this whole time. You may have said that I went to the Governmental Sector on a sightseeing trip but I went there with the intention of gaining many things. There are things I would not have gained without going to the Governmental Sector and things I could not do without having gone."

"Aren't you talking big."

Horn put strength into the hand holding the Priestess' vestments.

"And what exactly did you manage to gain?"

"……I will once again try to purify that child's mateki. If that fails, then I will accept any insults or act."

“Then quit being a Priestess.”

That sentence.

Was the limit for Sheltis and Monica who were watching so as to not disturb the equilibrium of that place——

……However.

“……”

He had been about to wordlessly run out but he stopped.

……Why. Why……are you looking at us with those kinds of eyes?

Monica and even Machine Ilis crystal were at a loss for words. “You mustn’t come here.” was the message conveyed by Ymy’s eyes.

“……You mean to make me leave the tower.”

"You're the one who said you would accept any act, aren't you?"

The Sennenshi looked down at the Priestess with her blinder-covered eyes.

"A Priestess who can't even save a single child is unnecessary. I'll pass on being satisfied with just having a Priestess who's there to fill in the numbers and fails big time at the crucial times. In that case, it would be best not to have her from the start."

"Understood. I will bet everything I have as a Priestess ."

"————Are you insane?"

"However, I also have a condition."

"" [T/N: The heck am I supposed to put for only a っ …that thing makes absolutely no sound on its own.]

For the first time, Horn stirred even if ever so slightly. That was because the girl who had only been held by the collar was now holding her wrist with all her strength.

——She's looking at……Monica and I?

"A condition?"

Figuring out the meaning of that gaze, Horn turned towards them.

"What about them?"

"You……you will travel together with the unit of senpai whom you called useless. Monica-senpai is absolutely not useless."

"……! W-Wait, Ymy."

Before Monica herself could speak up, Horn rebuked,

"Don't screw around. Travelling with somebody I know is baggage——"

"I'm not screwing arouuuuuund!"

Ymy's angry roar turned into a sound wave and shook that floor.

"I won't lose to mateki and Monica-senpai is not baggage!"

Holding fast to the arm grabbing her collar, the Priestess girl returned a glare.

"Even though I'm saying I will bet everything I have as a Priestess but I'll reject it if you don't accept my one condition. ……When I went to your treasured orphanage , all the children there said that they really loved you. That you are strong and kind and they really love you. But that's wrong: you're just a weakling who can't love anybody except for the children from the orphanage!"

"_____"

That instant.

A crack developed in the iron expression the Sennenshi had been keeping until now.

"……And if so?"

Horn distorted her mouth unpleasantly and she spat out.

"I'm a weakling? Even if that's true, are you trying to say you're not putting on airs!?"

"……Uu, uu!"

The hand before Ymy's neck tightened even more and,

"Okay, okay, that's no gooood—, any more and the Priestess' vestments will tear. Horn-chan, did you have an interest in such things?"

Surarii —— as quickly as if that onomatopeia could be heard, Ymy's vestments slipped through Horn's fingers.

"Ehh, ah. Huh?"

Ymy who was suddenly free again stared in wonder with a confused expression.

"……Ishtar."

"Hey there, it's been a while, Horn-chan. Been wellll?"

The person who had released Ymy's constraints was smiling aloofly.

The Sennenshi she was facing also showed a rare obvious grimace. It seemed to be saying that somebody annoying had shown up.

"Oh—, there, there. It's been rough on you, Ymy-sama—. Did it hurt—?"

"Eh, u-umm……"

"Ah. So—rry, I just treated you like I'sa-chan. …… Ahaha, well, pay it no mind."

"——What are you doing, Cadres Guard?"

Horn revealed her displeasure at the sudden intrusion and drew closer. Both of them were as tall as grown men and their eyes were at about the same height.

"No, no, Horn-chan, you're being scaaary."

"Don't play dumb. Even if it's you, I have the higher standing——"

"Eh—? Unfortunately for you, this was a request from your onee-san? When the blood rushes to her head and she won't listen to anybody, it might work if it's you, Ishtar-san, is what she told me."

"……Ane-ue, huh."

"Oh? As expected, you falter when Viola-sama's name comes up—? Fumu, fumu, heeeh, heeeh."

"Cadres Guard, I would prefer it if you were to simply state your business?"

"Mm—. My business was just to cool Horn-chan's head so I think I'll call that okay. Rather, don't you not have much time? That Yuugenshu you're searching for might conceal itself at any time."

Fwoosh. Ishtar's left arm which had a little bit of bare skin peeking out rose up and came to a stop pointing in their direction.

"It's a waste of time arguing here. You two, how about you go along with her like Ymy-sama said?"

"……"

"If Horn-chan defeats the Yuugenshu then there's a chance that that child's mateki will also disappear. If so, then the first thing should be for you two to go with her and defeat it. If the mateki happens to disappear, then all the better. Ymy-sama betting her position as Priestess on purifying will come after that. How about it?"

"……I have my misgivings. Taking along unnecessary Cadet Guards for exterminating Yuugenshu is against the tower's regulations as well—"

"They are useful."

Completely opposite Horn who was talking on and on quickly, Ishtar had a pleasant and calm tone.

"……What?"

"I said they are useful. It wouldn't be a problem bringing them along. They're perfect subordinates for Horn-chan who only likes outstanding subordinates."

The Cadres Guard showed a daring smile. The Sennenshi stared at that expression enough to burn a hole in it. Time passed with both of them maintaining their silence——

"Excuse me, Captain Horn."

Monica who had been silent until now interposed between the two who were staring at each other. She took out her silver plate-shaped badge and put the LCD screen on its back before Horn's eyes.

Emergency request.

She thrust out the LCD screen with that displayed.

"A recommendation from counter-measures HQ? You can't mean that you"

"Just now, we received a request to deploy from headquarters. In accordance with the recommendation from the Instructor, myself and three others shall be rightfully participating as the supporting unit for this case. With this, there should be no issue."

"……"

The Sennenshi closed her mouth and was silent.

"Truthfully, I cannot understand what is 'useful' about you."

"I have directly received such great trust from Ymy-sama so I will do my best. Also——"

She exchanged looks with Ymy who was restraining herself.

"If we defeat the Yuugenshu and that child's mateki disappears, then the talk of Ymy quitting being a Priestess also ends. To that end, I intend on accompanying you no matter what."

"……So you're of the same opinion as Ishtar."

Horn muttered with a voice that let no hint of her feelings in.

"So, how about it, Horn-chan?"

"Time is precious."

Twisting the corner of mouth unpleasantly, she took out her communications device from the holder at her waist.

"It's me, put Catria on the line. ……Catria. It's me, is the gun maintenance I asked for complete? I'll be heading over within four hundred seconds from now so

place those two and the other gun I handed to you on my transport. The crew members will be me——”

Horn turned her head halfway to them.

She looked appraisingly at Ishtar, Ymy and finally Sheltis, then gave a long, long sigh.

“……And a single Cadet Guard unit. No, you’re not mistaken and I didn’t say the wrong thing; I will be acting together with a single Cadet Guard unit. Got it? If you get it, then hurry up and prepare with the remaining three hundred eighty seconds.”

Part 3

At the open-air cafe, ‘The Twins Swans <Albireo>‘.

“Yuto-cha—n, take this cake set here to table five—. Eyriey, you take table seven’s order. After that, clean up table nine and prep table ten.”

“O—kay!”

"O-Okayyyyyy! A-Aren't we too busy, Head Chef!? I'm hopeless at this kind of physical laborrrrr!"

The adorable answer from Yuto was contrasted by Eyriey's shout that bordered on becoming a scream and echoed across the kitchen.

The time was right at noon.

It was the time that they became busy with customers lured in by the smell of the cooking from the kitchen.

"I-It's already noon! I made a promise to play with friends after noon, you know!?"

"You're meeting them here, right? Then work hard until your friends get here. Come now, I'll even pay you double time. Yuto-chan, watch and learn."

With Sheltis gone, Yuto had now completely become the main helper in the store.

At first, she had just been helping as far as wiping down tables but now she was an all-purpose helper than even took customers' orders and delivered food.

"Hey, hey, Eyri-nee! Yuto was praised by the customers as amazing!"

On each arm was two plates of a cake set and coffee. On top of that, she had a large tray on her head and she had another table's lunch set consisting of three plates on there, so it was surprising.

"Eyriey, take a lesson from her as well."

"……That's insane."

She headed out into the shop from the kitchen while holding a large tray.

"Ugeh, what a big line……"

The line that couldn't fit into the store was lined up outside the store in a coil.

And.

With the refreshing chime of the front door bell, the door of The Two Swans opened. Another customer? Everyone thought that and turned their eyes in that direction——

The store interior seemed to have become separated from the flow of time as it turned silent.

"Excuse me."

A single girl entered.

Wearing a simple and plain shirt and skirt, she was petite and had slender limbs. She had a face that still had youth left in it and she was just a little under Eyriey in height. She was not any older than her late teens. At best, she was thirteen or fourteen.

——Everybody forgot words and gulped.

——Her gem-like beauty could even be called a fantasy.

"……Umm, is Eyriey-san here?"

Her moist eyes that seemed sorrowful were a vivid azure.

Her skin was white like porcelain and there was not a blemish upon its smooth surface. And the most eye-catching thing about her was her long hair which extended to below her knees.

Just like seven-colored silk thread, it changed colors beautifully as it fluttered.

The color of reflective water —— with a translucent silvery white like ice as its base, the parts that light passed through shined with a compound color made with pearl and gold.

"Ohh, Shasa-chan. Been a while!"

At Eyriey's voice, the majority of the customers finally came back to their senses.

"It has been a while. ……I'm sorry, it has been a long time since I came to the Living Districts so I was a little lost. Am I late?"

"No—pe, actually you're right on time. Wait a sec, I can get off work so I'll just go tell the Head Chef! Ah, you can sit there at that reserved seat!"

"Okay."

The girl sat in the chair with a wide smile. Just that small action gave the impression of an impressive painting by a first-class painter.

"He—y, Head Chef, my friend's here so can I go—?"

"Oh my, it can't be helped. By the way, your friend wouldn't happen to be Sheltis, would it?"

"Nope. I met her while walking around observing at Tenketsu Palace and we got along. She's amazing; she has the entirety of the tower memorized."

Sophia

"Ohh. If it's a secretary from the tower, then I might have met her once before."

"Eh?"

What does that mean? While Eyriey's mouth was hanging open, the apron-clad Head Chef trotted from the kitchen to the store interior——

"Let's see……ah."

"Ah."

From the direction of the store came the dumbfounded voices of the two.

“Oh my. What’s thiiis, it’s been a whiiile! I was wondering who it was but it’s Salah——”

“Nice to meet you, I’m Shasa.”

“……the Quee”

“I’m Shasa.”

“…….Sa”

“Please refer to me as Shasa.”

“…….Okay, okay.”

After a little while, an uncommon wry smile appeared on the Head Chef’s face and she returned.

“Oh, hey, hey, Head Chef, do you maybe know Shasa? It sure sounded like it!”

“……No. I don’t know her at all.”

"What was that unnatural pause!? Hey, wait, don't turn away!"

"Well, never mind, never mind. So, Eyriey, you'll be eating with her and then going to play, right? I have two peoples' portions prepared."

Sandwiches with plenty of seasonal vegetables used and onion soup in a mug. For after the meal was bite-sized cakes and milk tea.

"Ohh! So with that, sorry for the wait, Shasa!"

"R-Right……"

She stared at the lunch set upon the table as if it were novel.

"What's up?"

"Ah……nothing. I always only have meals from Tenketsu (Sophia) Palace so it's a little different."

"Hohoh, now that you say it, there is a dining hall at the tower."

"There is a dining hall but I have my meal carried to my room. And it's been a while since I had something solid like this. I've at most had black tea with honey added."

"Geh. That's no good, Shasa, that's why you're so thin!"

"Thin……that's right, isn't it, like I thought. I've always had a lack of appetite though."

The girl patted her chest through her clothes. The thickness from her back to her chest, as well as her arms and thighs, were thin to the point it seemed they would snap if she were to miss a step on the stairs.

"It's not like you hate to eat though, right?"

"That's right. Not having many chances to eat because of work and continuing a lifestyle of not eating affects your body like this."

"Haa, you sound busy with work. Since you only get to enjoy yourself like this once a month."

"It's my job but it's like my life. ……It is my duty, and a promise."

Placing her hand to the edge of the steaming mug, the girl's face reddened slightly.

"But it's nice to 'enjoy myself' like this as well. It's somehow nostalgic."

"That's right—. Enjoying yourself is important, so eat well, enjoy yourself a lot and sleep well! Look, the soup's gonna get cold. Eat the sandwich too!"

"R-Right!"

Shasa gripped the mug with an expression of utmost seriousness.

"W-Well then! I, Shasa Endens Lin Kale, shall now partake of this lunch!"

"You don't have to be so serious about it."

"At any rate, it's been a long time. ……I-I'll do my best . Eii!"

She timidly lifted up the mug and drank the soup.

"……"

"How is it?"

"……It's delicious."

She couldn't believe it herself. She blinked numerous times and brought the mug towards and away from her mouth.

"B-But I still don't understand! Once more……ah……it's delicious……"

The girl hid her mouth with her hand and her face went bright red.

"……It's, delicious."

"Right—. Our Head Chef is amazing. Try the sandwich too!"

"R-Right!"

She nodded with a some more vigor than just prior and reached her hand out to a sandwich on the plate——

"……"

Her hand suddenly stopped.

"Shasa?"

"……My body……is……after all…… right after the barrier……transfer, if……I get careless……not good……"

Her shoulders slumped and she collapsed off the chair in that manner.

"Shasa!?"

——She'll hit the floor at this rate.

Her hand that she reached out reflexively wouldn't make it in time and the girl who had fallen out of the chair had her face make a beeline for the hard floor —— just before Eyriey who pictured that scene was about to scream, somebody's hand caught steady hold of Shasa's body.

"U-Uwawawawaa, E-Eyri-nee, help meeee!"

"Yuto!? A-Amazing, Yuto, good job!"

In place of Yuto who was holding up a body larger than her with all her strength, she held Shasa from behind. She sat the girl who seemed to have lost

consciousness on the chair once again and steadied her against the back of the chair.

"Pheeew……that was dangerous. I wonder what's wrong; we should call a doctor."

"Hey, hey, Eyri-nee, I think Shasa-nee is probably just tired."

Yuto tugged on the edge of her sleeve and nodded.

"She did say her work was tasking. I wonder if I should let her rest in my room until she gets better…… daaarn, I don't know where Shasa lives."

It would be best to take Shasa back to her house but she only knew that she worked at Tenketsu Palace. She didn't know which post she worked either so she didn't know who to contact.

"Shasa-nee said she had a room at the tower."

"Oh, really? Yuto, do you perhaps know where Shasa's room is?"

"Yeah, yeah! Shasa-nee told me last time!"

"Ohhh, good going. You did well!"

It was the first time she thought of Yuto who energetically shook her head as this reliable.

"Should I go get an acquaintance of Shasa-nee?"

"Yeah, please!"

"O—kay!"

Yuto ran out of the shop door.

……Really, that's great.

She hadn't known what to do when she collapsed but it would be one thing off her mind if they could send her back home. The cause was exhaustion so she needed her to rest.

……She purposefully came even though she was this tired.

"Head Chef, I'll be taking Shasa-chan for a bit———"

"That is a pleasing suggestion but it is not that much of a major matter. I alone will be enough."

The bell rang again.

"I heard there was someone I knew causing difficulties here."

It was a woman who was leaning up against the door frame.

Their eyes met and the woman smiled boldly.

……This is an acquaintance of Shasa's?

……Uwaa, amazing. She's really beautiful.

She was tall and slender with a sharp face to match.

Her glossy jet black hair was completely straight and definitely without a strand out of place. The beauty of her voluptuous body was also highlighted clearly through her pitch black vestments. Her twin mounds were full to the point that they seemed to be ready to spill out at any moment, her tight waist was curvaceous and it rose up once again at her hips. It was charm that even made Eyriey who was of the same gender gasp.

"It seems that you've taken care of Shasa."

She walked up to the table they were at and indicated the sleeping Shasa with her eyes.

"Ah, are you the person Yuto spoke of? Shasa's acquaintance."

"Tsali. To this child……let's see, I am a friend, quarreling opponent and guardian. We're not family bound by blood."

"Ah, like I thought! Ah— that surprised me. Since your hair and eye colors are completely different. I haven't heard of sisters that are this different."

"——As usual, you're unabashed regardless of the person, Eyri-nee."

"Fue?"

……As usual?

……Actually, did she just call me Eyri-nee?

"Ahh, I forgot to say that that's what I heard Yuto refer to you as."

Giggle. Upon Tsali's lips which had only a bold smile upon them thus far, her smile changed just a little to one more friendly.

"That's right! Right, right, Tsali-san, do you know where Yuto went off to? Rather, how did that kid manage to call you so quickly? A communicator? No, even if that were true, you wouldn't have gotten here so promptly."

"I thought that things would turn out like this again so I was secretly following her. As usual, she's quite the handful."

She carried Shasa's body.

"Yuto will return soon. As for Shasa……let's see, please play with her again any time from tomorrow on."

"Ehh. That's……I'm fine with it, but will Shasa be okay by tomorrow?"

"It seems that one day of rest really wasn't enough but this always happens. She should be fine if she rests for the entirety of today. It would be fine if you came to floor 290 of the tower tomorrow at ten in the morning."

"That's fine with me……"

"Then it's decided. I'll also relay that to Shasa."

Albireo

She turned her back on Eyriey and walked towards the door——

"Oh, right."

"Mm?"

Suddenly coming to a stop, Tsali turned just the side of her face to her.

A friendly and curious smile. Though her face was graceful and sharp to begin with, that smile was somehow really……really……like an innocent child's.

……Huh, this person?

……This person's smile……who is it……doesn't it kind of resemble somebody's smile?

"I'll say my thanks."

"Eh?"

"This person here, from the top of her head to the tips of her toes, is self-sacrificing and has a habit of reflecting

so somebody has to forcefully take her out to relax. Originally, it was supposed to be my job, but it seems that you are better for it."

Giii……

The door the woman in jet black vestments pushed on opened easily. The path that was not a path became a path of its own accord and seemed to bless her steps.

"It has been a long time since Shasa made an expression of such enjoyment."

That was the difference between her and Eyriey.

The words that were heard from Tsali that day were for the girl known as Eyriey and……in the distant future, what bestowed a 'third possibility' upon the floating Orbie Clar continent, though nobody knew this yet.

Only Tsali.

And Shasa who continued to sleep within her arms, had yet……

Part 4

Scraps of clouds came from one end of her vision and disappeared out the other. The sky was a deep blue all across and continued on forever.

"……With the expedition to the Governmental Sector, this makes the second time we're using an airship."

Kagura followed the droplets of glass clinging to the pressure-resistant windows with her eyes.

"Our destination is the Biotope so there's not much time to fully enjoying traveling through the air."

"Fully enjoy, huuuh. The Governmental Sector mission was important so our treatment wasn't bad but…… unfortunately, this time it's a transport ship so the inside is cramped and the cushions on the seats are worn out."

Vaiel who answered like that didn't stop looking out the window or crossing his arms.

"So, Leader. It's about time you told us about the mission this time."

"It's as I said when we left. We were recommended as support for the subjugation of the Yuugenshu discovered in the Biotope——"

"Not that, I mean that over there."

"Behind the general seating area —— the waiting room established for executive unit members. He indicated with his chin the heavy metallic door that was locked from the inside.

"Even if the support unit was chosen by the Instructor's whim, why the heck are we riding with the O great Sennenshi?"

"Ah……you could call that her idea."

Monica hesitated to speak with an uncomfortable expression.

"……Captain's order: I leave it to you, Sheltis."

"Geh!?"

Being elbowed in the side, Sheltis jumped up in his seat. ……I can't let my guard down. Just when I thought I could just stay silent and listen, this happens.

"……Let me ask this beforehand: should I say the truth or the pretense?"

"Let's start with the pretense."

"It's obviously most enjoyable to keep the speculation fun for last."

That was the response from the two who turned around in a flash.

"U—m. The pretense is as Monica said just before. We'll also be participating in the Yuugenshu subjugation so don't we have to group up with the advance party on-site? And so the fastest way there just happened to be travelling with a Sennenshi."

"Okay, next."

"Next is the real reason."

"……You know, no matter how much of a public attitude you're taking, it'd be nice if you were to show more of a reaction."

He had expected this but it was kind of lonely garnering such a lacking response.

"As for the real reason, you could say a few coincidences overlapped or we got wrapped up in it…… there was a little trouble between the fifth Priestess and the Sennenshi behind the door over there——"

"Ah—……that's enough. I have an idea of what happened."

"Eh, already?"

"Sheesh, sticking your head into troublesome things of your own accord."

Vaiel shook his hand, showing how much of a pain he thought it was.

"You probably just got mixed up in it as a mediator, right?"

"I-I'll just say this beforehand but I simply had business with Ymy! It was Captain Horn who suddenly stuck a gun to me——"

"Umm, if you say it so loudly, the person herself will hear you."

"……My bad."

Monica nodded with her head downcast and was silent.

"……I'll treat you to lunch next time. How about the special lunch set at the large dining hall on floor 248?"

"I'm even willing to add on after-meal coffee?"

"I'll have milk tea."

Monica nodded reluctantly and the negotiations were completed.

"Hey, hey, Sheltis, I have one thing I'm curious about."

"What is it?"

"That pilot kid has been glancing over at us since a little while ago so I wonder if he wants to join in. Ah, it's the one that just drew his head back."

Pilot? Come to think of it —— he had noticed someone watching them but it didn't seem like it would be an issue so he hadn't paid it much mind.

"Hey, the one at the pilot seat over there, did you need us for something?"

"……N-Noooo. D-Don't mind meeee."

The one peeking out from the pilot seat was a boy still in his mid-teens.

He had greenish-brown hair and brown eyes. He had a thin face, his response was weak, he still had an expression like he'd burst into tears at any moment and his ears which jutted out on either side were also shivering slightly.

……Are those Nell Folk ears?

"What, I was wondering who it was, but isn't that Catria?"

"……That voice, Kagura?"

The boy who was hiding in the shadow of the seat widened his eyes.

"Seriously. It's me; didn't you realize it with this on me?"

Kagura removed the machine helmet which was completely covering her head. Her ears also reached far out to the sides and were covered in warm-seeming fur.

"Mm? Acquaintances between brats?"

"Since the Nell Folk working at Tenketsu Palace have constructed their own independent network. This child is Sophia ……well, it's as you can see, he's more cautious than I am. Though it was unexpected for him to become the third unit's pilot."

"N-No. You're wrong……I'm Captain Horn's maintenance worker. Piloting is……an e-extra."

The boy set it to auto-pilot and stood up from the seat.

"I see. So, what is it? Looking over here would suggest that you have an interest but that's unusual for you."

"……"

He stayed silent for a moment but the sound of him breathing in could be heard.

"……U-Um……I just thought, you were a really close-knit unit……"

"Is that so? Isn't this normal?"

"Probably……I think it's really rare."

Having that said directly —— Sheltis exchanged looks with Monica beside him.

"Monica, is that so?"

"I think it depends on the unit. ……Though we're not on the bad end."

"That's because everyone gathered here is a meddler."

Vaiel crossed his legs and sighed to indicate them.

"……N-No. ……I-It's just……well, ……I thought it was nice. ……Captain Horn doesn't have that feeling to her much."

"You don't get it. Then why don't you switch units?"

And.

The Nell Folk boy narrowed his eyes and looked downwards in embarrassment.

"……But she's cool."

"Your Captain, you mean?"

"……Yeah. ……Also, she always leaves the gun maintenance to me."

His hands were worn out —— from touching the gun's rust and oil and they had burns and scratches from injuries during maintenance.

He looked dearly at his hand which was painful to look at.

"Catria."

"Ye-Yeeeess!?"

The boy hopped up in place when Horn, who had come from the rear, spoke.

"This was in my cargo, but what is it?"

It was an automatic handgun painted silver. It was easily two times larger than the guns used by gunners with twin pistols in Tenketsu Palace <Sohpia> and a shinryoku carved seal was etched into its grip.

"Uh……umm, it's a new creation. Production code, ' Silver King <Rusty Heidt>'……the gun's slide and rifling are designed to be larger and it also uses special bullets."

"Special bullets?"

"Y-Yes! I wanted to make the bullets themselves in a new metallic structure. After making a request to a Priestess many times, I finally got a carved seal with a Priestess' baptism spell applied to it. It hasn't been tested , but it shouldn't be an exaggeration to call it a bullet specialized to Yuugenshu!"

"A Priestess' baptism spell meaning ane-ue's?"

"Ah, n-no. Viola-sama was always out of the tower so the best at baptism type spells——"

"……That's enough. I have a good idea of who it was. "

Horn put the giant one-handed gun into her shoulder holster and sighed.

"U-Umm! Not many bullets have been made so there are only three loaded……"

"I don't mind. Either way, I won't immediately use it in real combat. I don't have a habit of using a gun I'm not used to and increasing the risks."

"……I see."

The boy visibly drooped his shoulders visibly and was downcast.

"……I was wondering if I would just barely make it in time for the subjugation mission this time."

"I believe I told you I didn't require any useless consideration. Rather than that, return to the pilot seat; aren't we arriving at the great salt lake soon?"

Speaking back with an indifferent voice, the Sennenshi turned towards them.

"I'll say this ahead of time. You should just stay quiet and follow. Don't think about providing support or fighting the Yuugenshu; you should just bear in mind not to get in the way of my battle."

"……But then there's no reason behind us coming as a support unit."

"Don't misunderstand."

The words which permitted no rebuttal brought silence to the airship.

"I took you along because of the Cadres Guard's suggestion. I will decide everything beyond that. The support unit will abide by the commander's orders at once upon reaching the site ——— that is what is detailed by the Guard Regulations Institute, but is there a problem with that?"

"……"

"It looks like you want to say something?"

"……No."

Monica gnashed her molars and shook her head sideways. Horn seemed to snort at that gesture and quickly turned her back to the pilot's seat.

"Relax. It's not like I won't entrust you with anything. Manpower will be required to track the S vector, eighth class. I will have you aid in the tracking and discovery whether you want to or not. ……Catria."

"Y-Yeessss!?"

"How many more minutes until we arrive?"

"Th-The great salt lake is already visible below! We will land now!"

"——It's finally time."

As she squeezed out that in a hoarse voice from within her throat, both her hands were lightly shaking.

"You bunch, get ready as well. Once we land, we will set out in the direction of the S vector, eighth class' escape route."

Part 5

A pure white glimmer extended as far as the eye could see on the downhill of a gentle slope.

It was a scene reminiscent of a large snowy valley with many large mountains stretching out. It was not actually snow but countless salt piled up over the course of many years.

“Look, Sheltis, it’s an amazing place.”

Machina

Accompanied by Machine pearl, Kagura gave a sigh of admiration.

“Water with a little salt content flows here into the basin from the river and evaporates, accumulates and creates this beautiful scenery. I’ve seen it in documents but it’s my first time seeing it in person.”

“Really, it’s like snow.”

Crunch……crunch……

Salt grains crunched underfoot. It felt like he was stepping on a lump of snow.

Shantia Great Salt Lake.

It was one of only two salt lakes that had been confirmed in the vast Biotope and was terrain that bore the prefix of ‘Glittering <Shant>‘.

“It really is amazing; this is all salt?”

“……It’s not very appealing.”

It was somewhat unusual but Monica and Vaiel who were walking ahead frequently surveyed the surroundings.

“Captain Horn, sorry for the wait.”

Finally.

Two Regular Guards were bearing a machine gun and jogged over when they noticed them.

“What’s the situation?”

“No changes. With the two units patrolling the vicinity and the two support units, there are four units in total surrounding the great salt lake. To now, there have been no reports of it slipping through the encirclement.”

"Good work. Don't slacken your caution; I'll be tracking the 'S vector, eighth class'. I ordered Scheele to be on standby but have she arrived?"

A girl in vestments walked up after the two Guards.

"I'm here."

"I have only one order for you. Erase the Yuugenshu's mateki with a barrier type spell when we find it. I won't say you need to restrain it, but at least keep it in one spot. You can do it, can't you."

"I will do my utmost."

"That's good; then follow along."

"Ye……"

Yes. The apprentice Priestess who spoke suddenly stopped moving and stood still. She wasn't even quivering but only her shoulders shook lightly——

"What's wrong?"

"Monica……senpai?"

Without answering Horn's question, the girl removed her hood.

"Monica-senpai!? Monica-senpai! I-It's me! Pia!"

"Pia……Pianalis Scheele?"

With a glance at the girl's face exposed to the sunlight, the girl who served as unit captain greatly widened her eyes.

"Wawaa, it really is Monica-senpaiii! No way, no way, why are we meeting here!? Actually, what's with your appearance? You look just like a Guard!"

"Not just look like, I actually am a Guard. Since moving past being an apprentice Priestess, about three years ago……h-hey, wait! I get it, so let me go a bit!"

Monica earnestly pried herself loose from the apprentice Priestess clinging to her and sighed.

"……I told you many times to refrain from just hugging people."

"I'm just that happyyy! Since I managed to reunite with a senpai I thought had retired in this kind of place.

It's not like I'm trying to act the part of a mature apprentice Priestess either————……ah……"

Falling silent and taking care of her surroundings, the apprentice Priestess slipped her hood back on.

"A-Ahem……my apologies, Captain, I lost myself there. As it was a reuniting with a revered senpai, please overlook this."

"Just give me a brief explanation."

"Y-Yes! This Cadet Guard here is my senpai as an apprentice Priestess. This is from two years ago, but she advanced as far as the final trial for a Priestess."

"……Is that so."

Horn raised an eyebrow at Scheele's words.

"Yes. Pardon me, but did you not allow her to travel with you because you knew this?"

"……"

Without answering the apprentice Priestess' question, Horn casually folded her arms.

"I see, an apprentice Priestess who made it to the final trial. So that is what the Priestess <Ymy> and the Cadres Guard <Ishtar> appraised you on."

"——No."

Monica directly faced the Sennenshi who spoke with an implicative tone.

"That appraisal was not mine but my entire unit's."

"You sure can talk."

Horn smiled boldly.

"——Change of plans. Scheele."

"Yes."

"You will remain on defense of this camp. In this large of an area, we don't know where the S vector, eighth class will appear."

"Understood."

Watching the apprentice Priestess slowly back off, Horn's next focus was the girl holding the crossed rods <Rosario> in both hands.

"Your said your name was Monica."

"……What is it?"

"I'll have you take responsibility for what you said."

Massive, black machine pistols. The Sennenshi who held one in each hand of these heavy firearms that a normal person would require two arms to hold.

"I will also order you into combat based on the enemy's strength so be prepared."

Part 6

In a hallway filled with light.

"……I'm really sorry. Ymy-san and Ishtar-san."

Fluttering her tunic-styled vestment, the petite Priestess hung her head.

"If only I had kept Horn in check more."

"It's fine—. Viola-sama, you don't have to lower your head like that."

With the same aloof smile as ever, Ishtar patted her delicate shoulders.

"I think the location was the great salt lake. Then they should be arriving around now. That's a nice place—, and the view is also good so it's easy to spot a Yuugenshu. Horn-chan is outstanding and the Cadet unit travelling with her is also a gathering of individuals with more than meets the eye. Right, Ymy-sama?"

"Ye……Y-Yes."

Being urged with a suspicious smile, Ymy's face unconsciously twitched.

……I wonder what she means.

Monica-senpai as an apprentice Priestess? Or…… Sheltis? When I talk with this Cadres Guard, it feels like the inner reaches of my mind are being seen through.

"You can also relax, Viola-sama—. From Ishtar's point of view, well, they won't 'lose'. If there's anything to worry about, I guess it's the enemy escaping? And one more thing ——— Ymy-sama?"

The second question was much heavier and sharper in her look and tone.

"Are you serious about that promise you made with Horn-chan?"

"……I will once again try to purify that child's mateki. If that fails, then I will accept any insults or act."

"Then quit being a Priestess."

"Understood. I will bet everything I have as a Priestess ."

If Horn defeated the S vector, eighth class and the mateki disappeared with that, then that was fine. However, in the off-chance that the mateki remained despite the main body's defeat, she would once again attempt to purify it.

……If she were to fail.

"Wait."

Viola's voice which was mixed with anger did not permit Ymy's words.

"I would also like to speak on that matter. I've heard that that was basically something Horn decided on her own. It is clear the fault lies with my little sister. …… Ymy-san, you cannot allow yourself to be swept up in the heat of the moment and accept such a thing. If you have awareness as a Priestess, then reconsider this."

"……"

"Ishtar is in agreement—. A Priestess isn't somebody that can just be replaced with a person if one is gone. I think Horn-chan would also understand if she cooled her head?"

"……Yeah."

She understood that. She tried to understand it.

She knew better than anybody else that a vacancy in the Priestesses could not be permitted and that Horn's words at that time were impulsive.

However——

"Thank you, Viola, Ishtar-san. But it's fine? I don't have any intention of quitting being a Priestess from this. I don't feel like failing at purifying the mateki either."

"That's sufficient. But then wasn't there no need to accept what Horn-chan said?"

"……No."

Ymy shook her head with a smile in response to Ishtar who spoke inquisitively.

"It's true that I think I need to do it with that much of a resolve."

A Priestess who can't save a single child infected with mateki is no good.

My goal is much, much higher.

That's right. If I compare myself to that child I met in the world of a thousand years ago———

"[Unto me, the only wish of which I am capable……]"

"[Yu/ ris-ia Sophie, Arma-Selah]"

The child known as Shasa.

The more she remembered it, that child's shinryoku spells were of a different level. Compared to the current Priestesses of Tenketsu Palace……no, it might even rival that of the Queen's.

Sophia

She had a goal.

Not just the personal goal of curing Sheltis' mateki but a goal as a Priestess. That child awaited on the path to accomplishing both. That was what she felt. [T/N: "That child" refers to Shasa.]

"I mean that you're the only one who hasn't changed a bit from three years ago."

"Change. There will definitely not be enough stimulus for your shinryoku to bloom."

The words spoken to her at the Grand Sanctuary by the woman named Tsali.

……I might need the resolution to change myself on my own. If I can't do that, then that's all the more reason to have the resolve to quit being a Priestess.

"Well, Ymy-sama is a specialist in baptism spells. It's not Ishtar's place to stick her opinion in—"

The Cadres Guard shrugged with an expression that was no quite a smile and not quite a bitter smile.

"It's dependent on you. You too, Viola-sama."

"……Yes. Ymy-san, please pay no mind to Horn's words from just before."

Being prompted by Ishtar, Viola also turned around. The Priestess headed towards her own room and the Cadres Guard moved towards the elevator. Ymy watched both of them go——

"Good change."

"Say, Ymy. I wonder if you'll hear my voice soon enough?"

In a far off and distant place.

She heard a nostalgic voice from someone. She felt so.

Part 7

A mirror world.

A thin layer of water stuck to the surface of salt which spread out endlessly, making the great salt lake into a gigantic mirror of the world.

"……Amazing. Everyone's faces are reflected on the ground."

Kagura sighed while staring directly down. It must have been fairly curious as she had removed the machine helmet she had been wearing and looked around at the surroundings.

"It's like the ground is a mirror. A mirror with enough clarity to see every strand of hair."

"Even if it is a great salt lake, it seems it's limited to after rainfall."

Splash.

With the sound of a puddle of water splashing underfoot, Sheltis turned towards Kagura who was beside him.

"……The problem is that it's just a little too bright."

The ground underfoot was a mirror. Because the sunlight was reflected as-is, the reflected light was also strong. If they stayed in that place for a long time, it might hurt their eyes.

"Hey, hey, Sheltis, I have a good idea. Sunglasses!"

"No. It doesn't seem like they'd suit me."

He responded bluntly to Machine Ilis crystal who was swaying at his chest and looked at the members walking ahead of him again.

Walking at the front was Horn with machine pistols in both hands. On her back was a long-range sniping rifle and reserve revolving machine pistols could be seen at her waist holsters.

A little bit away from her was Monica gripping her crossed rods <Rosario> and Vaiel with his iron fist protectors <Knuckle Dusters> equipped. Kagura followed behind them with Sheltis walking more-or-less beside her.

"……It's a little bit of an odd order in a certain way."

A gunner coming up to the front went against the basics of formations but as this was concerning the Sennenshi, Horn Nova, this didn't apply. She was a generalist that excelled in anything from long-range sniping to hand-to-hand combat. Her combat skills were high enough that she had been attributed as such.

And just before that.

“You are a curious individual.”

“Eh?”

She said it with a sigh.

Horn, who had been silent to this point, suddenly murmured with her gaze still fixed ahead.

“You seem to have been quite close with Scheele.”

“……Yeah. We were both apprentice Priestesses so she ’s two years my junior.”

Monica nodded, knowing the line was directed at her.

“I had heard from ane-ue that apprentice Priestesses did not form friendships amongst themselves.”

“It is as Viola-sama said. It is well-known. In comparison with the handful of Priestess positions, there are ten times to a hundred times that number in apprentice Priestesses. The fact of the matter is that they are all competing against each other.”

Monica faced the back of the Sennenshi walking ahead and continued.

"Scheele and I are the same. I'm a busybody so I would look after my juniors' troubles but that was an even more detested act. For Scheele as well, putting aside what it looked like on the surface, there would have been times she would be troubled by being in my care. Looking from her viewpoint, it would be like being pitied by an enemy." [T/N: The original literally means " being sent salt by an enemy". It's when you assist your enemy when they're suffering.]

"And in the middle of that, Scheele grew attached to you?"

"That's……because I quit as an apprentice Priestess, I think."

She spun together words plainly and without any personal feelings.

"Not being opponents has removed the fence in our hearts. We couldn't do it as apprentice Priestesses but with the pros and cons relationship gone, Scheele can connect with me honestly."

"That's a pleasant irony."

Horn who was walking ahead laughed.

"There's no difference between Guards and apprentice Priestesses. The Elite Guards are also like that. They're under the command of the Sennenshi but every single one of them is an ambitious person looking to get you while you're not looking. ……Though they would be unreliable as subordinates if they weren't at least that ambitious. It's quite a dilemma." [T/N: "get you while you're not looking" is literally written as "cut your head off while you sleep". That old assassination one.]

"……But competition like that is everywhere. If not for that, the quality of the Priestesses and Sennenshi could not be assured, so it is necessary."

"Then those in your unit are also opponents for you."

"……"

Monica went silent at the Sennenshi's words.

After a little while.

"……It is my goal to become a Sennenshi with all of my teammates."

"So you're putting up a front."

The resolute girl's voice and Horn's half-surprised mutter were transmitted in that place.

"Cooperation, teamwork, collaboration. I've heard it put many ways but all the way until I became a Sennenshi, I have never experienced the meaning of those words. Apprentice Priestesses and Guards are cut from the same cloth. The bunch at Tenketsu (Sophia) Palace are all dead set on defeating their rivals."

"Pardon me, but what of Viola-sama? She also has a history as a member of Tenketsu (Sophia) Palace."

"Ane-ue is not in the category of Tenketsu (Sophia) Palace. She is a family member of the orphanage, the same as me."

Saying that, Horn kicked rock salt under her.

"Children without parents and children without friends. ……The children at the orphanage gathered

from that and continue to cooperate and live on. Those children are much better than the bunch at the tower. ……Though for thinking like that, that Priestess branded me a ‘weakling‘.”

Crunch.

While watching the rock salt split under her feet, she continued on.

“I don’t place faith in the bunch at the tower and only treat the orphanage family specially. That Priestess doesn ’t seem to be able to tolerate that. If that makes me a weakling, then that should make her a weakling Priestess for asserting she can purify mateki when she can’t.”

“……”

……Wrong.

Whispering that within his heart, Sheltis clenched his fists without anyone’s notice————

“It looks like you want to say something?”

Immediately afterwards, Horn turned to him with a tone mixed with cynicism.

"It was the same a few days ago but I'll at least praise your courage in not showing cowardice while facing me. "

The piercing gaze that was felt even if one did not wish to was turned towards the end of the formation.

"……You're referring to me?"

"Did you think I wouldn't notice you glaring at me so openly? You look like you want to say something, so if you have a rebuttal then say it."

A smile with provocation and inquisitiveness mixed in spread on her face seen from the side.

"What I……want to say most is"

Coming to a stop there, Sheltis forced out the voice he' d kept within his throat.

"that she is not a weakling." [T/N: With this, it's decided that I won't be separating any sentences that are split like this into two. I might still do it for less obvious ones though.]

The land of shining salt.

The quiet and coldly transmitted sound waves.

"The Priestess named Ymy Ele Soufflenictole is…… very strong. Stronger than you or me, I believe that she carries stronger feelings than anyone."

"Your basis for that is?"

"The Priestesses' purification room."

It should have been conveyed to Horn the Sennenshi with those words.

"There's no way you don't know of the Priestesses' purification room. As you requested the purification of a child named Tessha, you must have also entered Ymy's purification room once."

The fastening belts meant to restrain a patient who was thrashing out of control.

The blood stains left behind by Guards who had set into necrosis after being infected with a great deal of mateki were still vivid. Surely they had been unable to

wipe it off no matter how hard they tried. In that ghastly place where blood had been spilled to that extent, Ymy fought with mateki alone.

She resisted the unease and loneliness to her utmost, alone.

"How much of a heavy pressure do you think it is for a girl of not even seventeen years to be called the ' Priestess of Baptism' and have expectations of her from those of the floating continent? The Priestesses are relied on by the Guards and those in the Living Districts to be able to purify any mateki……she was persuaded that she is the last hope and that cornered her into extending the Priestess training which should normally not be lengthened."

Orbie Clar

"_____"

"That's not just for the child named Tessha. It's not related to the Guards or the civilians in the Living Districts either; the Priestesses work hard for all those living upon the floating continent. They absolutely will not slight others for reasons like they can't trust them or that they're useless."

Orbie Clar

"……Let's suppose that's true."

Slowly, Horn looked ahead and started walking again.

"Are you not denying that the Guards and apprentice Priestesses of the tower do not view the others as their comrades?"

"On that point as well, my view is different from yours."

"How is it different?"

"It might be like Monica said earlier, that people cannot open their hearts to each other because of competition. But do you think they do that because they want to?"

It's not just Ymy and Monica. The apprentice Priestess, Scheele, from just now was also a good example. They didn't actually like that thorny relationship.

"If they don't like it, it's fine if they quit. It's a simple matter."

"——They can't quit!"

Before he himself realized it, he had put strength into those words.

"……Despite undergoing harsh training and being unable to form friendships with those around, apprentice Priestesses still aim for something they want to achieve beyond those painful memories. I can't understand what it is that you can't accept about those from the tower who do their best."

"____"

"You patrol the dangerous Biotope by your own will and continue to search for the Yuugenshu……honestly, you're amazing. But Ymy is the same. While almost being crushed by the surrounding pressure, she does her best for the sake of those suffering from mateki. …… Even so……why is someone like you who is doing her best to save a treasured child unable to acknowledge a Priestess who wishes to protect those important to her in the same way!"

Silence.

A nervous silence filled the land of salt which shined silver.

"That was quite the outstanding speech."

With slow footsteps, the blinder-wearing Sennenshi turned to him again.

"And you're a Cadet Guard? What are you preaching to me? Do you want to call me a weakling as well?"

"……"

Horn's tone was plainly provocative. Her gaze was sharp enough that it was clearly conveyed even through the blinder.

"——A waste of time."

But.

Contrary to expectations, the one who looked away first was her.

……That's unexpected.

……So she won't deny it.

Looking at her back from the end of the line, Sheltis narrowed his eyes slightly. Despite her biting response, she had the same reaction as the time with Ymy.

"But that's wrong: you're just a weakling who can't love anybody except for the children from the orphanage !"

"……And if so?"

Judging from Horn's personality, there was no way that Ymy's words would not have wounded her pride. At that time, Sheltis had been prepared for Horn to be enraged. However, Horn's response had been sharp but she had not denied Ymy's words in the end.

……It's not that she didn't deny them but that she couldn't?

……Maybe Horn actually acknowledges Ymy at the bottom of her heart?

She knew of Ymy's efforts as a Priestess and that the Guards and apprentice Priestesses serving as her subordinates were helping her.

However, Horn did not acknowledge those yet.

——Because she wants to save the child named Tessha.

Not a single Priestess could save the child who was part of the orphanage family. She couldn't acknowledge Tenketsu (Sophia) Palace which placed those Priestesses at the top and there was no way she could acknowledge the subordinates of Tenketsu (Sophia) Palace.

……Even though, in actuality, they are two people who should be able to understand each other the most.

……Even though Ymy and Horn should be the two who most wish to save those afflicted with mateki.

"____"

However. No matter how much Sheltis stared at her, Horn's wordless back was firm and her mind isolated from the outside.

"Yoo, by the way, how long are we gonna keep walking?"

Vaiel who had kept his mouth shut suddenly turned to Kagura.

"Wasn't it said just a little while ago? Until we reach the center of the great salt lake."

The girl pointed at the digital map displayed on the Machina Machine pearl.

"If we corner it up to there, the Yuugenshu won't have a place to escape to. From the center for a radius of two kilometers, the Regular Guard unit has formed an enclosure."

"They're being really strict on the preparations."

Vaiel kicked the rock salt at his feet and sent it flying. Looking at that from behind, Kagura turned to him and called out.

"By the way, I would like to ask you something. A little while ago, you said the great salt lake was 'not very appealing'."

"Ah? Did I say something like that?"

"You can't play dumb because the recording has been saved on this Machine Machina pearl."

"……Damn it. So what do you want to ask?"

Being told that it was no use trying to fool her, Vaiel shrugged.

"This place is beautiful and unusual. However, the first thing you said was that it's 'not appealing'; what do you mean? I remember something out of place."

"Ah, I would also like to ask. Though I thought I'd ask afterwards."

"……I can't hear anything."

The person in question turned his face away while keeping his arms crossed.

"Did I say that too fast? Then I'll repeat it."

"Not that, you idiot, I meant that it's bothering me how quiet it is."

Plop……He forcefully lifted his shoe which was submerged in water to the ankle.

"Look, there's this much water. It's enough to call it a salt lake so it must be a lake to begin with. Even so, there's nothing here. Not a single fish is swimming in the water and there's not a single bird flying in the sky if you look up. That just doesn't sit right with me."

"There's just this much salt, you knooow. It would be hard for a living creature to survive."

"I get that but somehow, I'm not used to it. It's too quiet."

Vaiel had his brows knitted as he tried to start walking again, but just before that, Kagura suddenly pulled on his sleeve.

"Whoa, what?"

"……Ah. No, you said it was 'too quiet'……but wasn't there the cry of a cat just now?"

"A cat?"

"Yes. It was a cute cry that went 'nya—o'."

She touched the sides of her ears that were poking out. Because the Nell folk lived in a snowy region of the Lagoon floating archipelago, they developed the hearing necessary to hear others in the middle of a snowstorm.

"Did you hear it, Sheltis?"

"No, but what about you Ilis?"

"I am the same. I'm not good at perceiving sounds. I'm this small crystal so my sound collection devices have a limit."

……If Kagura said so, then I'd like to believe that it's true.

……In that case, is the sky suspicious?

Without relaxing his wariness of the ground, Sheltis tilted his neck a little and looked overhead.

"There shouldn't be any cats around this place so isn't it just a bird like a seagull? That bird that goes nya— nya — for its cry. I'm pretty sure they lived around river mouths or tideland."

"I wonder. ……I'm not sure because time has passed but, at any rate, it was a cat-like voice."

Following him, Kagura and then Vaiel looked up at the sky.

"……Is it that?"

Monica suddenly pointed at a spot on the salt land.

A small black shadow. It wasn't a shadow but a black body. Four thin legs and a roundish tail. Long and narrow pupils that shined golden.

"Nyaao……"

Its cute mew was like that of any black cat in the Living Districts.

"It appears to still be a kitten. Its gait is also premature ."

"It got lost all the way out here? Sheesh, the parents are probably looking for it."

Monica and Kagura naturally leaked their feelings out at that appearance.

However.

Sheltis widened his eyes and glared at the black cat which had come right before their eyes.

……I was on guard.

……Just when and how did it manage to get this close ?

The entire surface of the great salt lake shined silver. If there was something like a black cat in this world of just white, then he definitely should have noticed. Not just him, Horn Nova should have perceived it, of course.

"Nyaao……"

"Poor thing. I wonder if walking around has made it weak?"

The kitten tried to draw closer to Monica's legs——

"Monica, get away from that!"

Everything was simultaneous.

Sheltis jumping out in front of Monica and.

"That's supposed to be camouflage?"

Horn's bullet piercing the kitten's body.

"……!"

"Silence."

The Sennenshi interrupted Monica who raised her voice reflexively.

"Take a good look. If you look at it, does it still appear to be a kitten?"

Fshhh —— though it was supposed to have received a fatal wound, 'something' stood up without injury.

The eyes that should have been golden had turned into a reddish crimson at some point. Its body which should have been the size of a kitten was also expanding at an unpleasant rate.

"Unfortunately, my eyes are special; isn't it unfortunate that you didn't get in a surprise attack?"

Tap. Touching the side of her blinder with the gun barrel, Horn's lips drew out a dangerous smile.

"……Viola-sama's 'Celestial Map Drawing'?"

"As expected, a former apprentice Priestess would know. My eyes are the same as my older sister's, with shinryoku to see the future —— I clearly saw the future in which that attacked you. What a cheap act."

Confirming the world of the future a few seconds ahead, foreseeing the opponent's movements and firing. One of the reasons that Horn Nova reigned at the summit of the gunners on the floating continent was this.

"Hereditary territory type shinryoku art. Syun-rei who 's also a Priestess possesses the power to 'see the shape of others' shinryoku' but my sister and I……well, ours is like a degraded version."

Muttering almost to herself, Horn once again pointed her guns forwards.

"Now then, we've finally met. You're the S vector, eighth class, right?"

What the Sennenshi declared that to could no longer possibly be called a kitten.

——Yuugenshu.

Its crimson eyes were filled with a clear hostility and its large body which was wrapped in a dark purple mist continued to swell. Its legs were originally four but they each split at the tip and became eight. Its roundish tail also distorted into an oval and wriggled almost like a snake.

"Sheltis, it's that time's……"

"I thought the same thing."

It resembled the Yuugenshu they had found in the underground room when they accompanied Leon to the

floating Lagoon archipelago. It had been sleeping within a water tank at first but that Yuugenshu had also become gigantic the instant it left the water tank.

……It's really like it just came out of slumber and grew up.

In actuality, the Yuugenshu from that time was called the 'Sleeping Child'. And this 'S vector, eighth class' also used mateki to assault its opponent and put them into a coma.

"Does it not resemble it?"

"……"

Sheltis chose to remain silent in response to Monica's question.

The image that formed a common point between the two Yuugenshu —— 'sleep' and 'awakening'. Was that a secret connected to the truth of the Garden of Eden Corrupted Song>?

"That's enough talk."

Horn's voice flatly interrupted.

"Except for Monica, move away from me and spread out. This guy's mateki is troublesome."

A Yuugenshu which commanded mateki which even a Priestess could not heal.

……Other than me, if someone is bathed in it, they should sustain great damage regardless of the presence of formal wear.

A pincer attack with him moving in for close-range combat and Horn sniping would be more definite. But that was because of his secret that he could nullify mateki. It was not a plan he could use in front of Monica, Horn and Vaiel who did not know this.

"Do it."

"——Roger."

Gently, light wrapped around Monica's surroundings as if jumping. The azure light indicative of the activation of a barrier type arts sparkled as they weaved layers.

Crunch……

In a moment, something broke underneath the Yuugenshu's legs.

With the sound of something hard breaking, a black crack appeared in the pure white ground.

That crack spread in all directions from beneath the Yuugenshu in the blink of an eye.

"Wha……!?"

"It's a gigantic crevice! Something like this was below the rock salt layer……everyone, retreat!"

"Following Ilis' warning, they jumped back. Kagura and Vaiel who were at the end of the line also turned around and moved away from the crevice.

It can't be.

"It didn't run away but instead lured us to this crevice ____"

"A trap!?"

Horn and Monica who had been the closest to the Yuugenshu would not make it in time with their

flustered reactions. The ground below was breaking so they couldn't jump or move back.

"Monica!"

"Shelt……!"

With the voice that became a echo and was disappearing, the two fell along with the Yuugenshu into the crevice.

"……Tch!"

"Sheltis, you mustn't!"

He was halted by Machine Ilis crystal before jumping into the crevice to follow the two.

……The hole is too deep.

He had no idea how it went underneath so it was too dangerous to jump in to follow those two right now.

"! Sheltis, a mateki reading detected to the front and right. Incoming!"

"A new one, huh!"

Cr……crunch……

Cracks sprung up one after another like a spider's web in the vast rock salt. Those gradually expanded and from within the gaps overflowed deep purple mist.

"The leaders, Monica and Captain Horn, are underground and its allies are going to fight us here…… we've been splendidly divided in strength. At any rate, it seems like we'll have a basis for verifying the Yuugenshu 's intelligence after this. Even though in the past, it was said the Yuugenshu had no intelligence."

Kagura smiled wryly, accompanied by the floating Machina Machine pearl.

"Though that's if we return safely."

Sheltis drew his dual swords from their holders and stared fixedly at the deep purple mist.

Crimson eyes rose up within the mist. One, two…… three, four……there might be many more still hiding underground.

"Connection successful. I have requested support from the unit who has set up camp at the coast."

"Thanks."

All directions. The mist beasts creeped up from the crevices around them to surround them. Each of them was a small one which took the form of a lion but it was troublesome because a Yuugenshu's strength could not be judged from its appearance.

……Which ones are strong and which ones are weak?

……I don't have time to think about that.

"Let's go."

Telling that to the two behind him, Sheltis ran along the silver ground.

Part 8

……Plop.

The droplet of water that dropped off the edge of a crystal made a small splash.

"Are you dead?"

"Please don't just kill off people like that."

Replying like that to the Sennenshi's disinterested murmur, Monica slowly raised her body. Despite everywhere on her body hurting from the shock of the fall, it was fortunate that her injuries were only to that extent.

……Wheeew.

Mental fortitude. Isolating the pain signals running throughout her, she concentrated on her shinryoku spell.

[Sia Sec elis arc……Is io miel]

[That day's dream, once more……for the sake of that.]

The release precedent.

The azure light indicative of barrier type arts spread out in a sphere around her with a radius of 10 metres. It lit everything within its area up equally.

"A crystal cavern?"

Crystals stuck out from the ground underfoot and the walls to the sides. Those reflected the shinryoku's light and glittered in seven colors.

……To think that an underground world like this was below the great salt lake.

The crystals which far exceeded her height were sticking up all over; it felt like she had been thrown into a labyrinth made of crystal.

"It's a long-awaited invitation but I don't have any intention of keeping it company for long."

Placing a hand to the blinder over her eyes, Horn forcefully tore it off. Her sharp, almond eyes were revealed. [T/N: Almond here referring to shape.]

"Your blindfold?"

"I will perceive the present world with my own eyes and the future world with 'Celestial Map Drawing'. It puts a burden on my mind and causes dizziness so I don't like it but……this also raises my accuracy. There's something more important than that."

She lightly pressed the black gun tip against a crystal.

“Don’t get too close to the crystals; we don’t know which ones a Yuugenshu is hiding behind.”

“……Wouldn’t that be within the predictions of your ‘ Celestial Map Drawing‘?”

“I can’t see that far ahead into the future. If I could, I would have been able to avoid that crevice from before too. ‘Celestial Map Drawing‘ is a power specifically for sniping.”

Her eyes were tinged emerald. Emerald was the color of shinryoku arts of the territory type so that had gathered and could be seen as her real eye color.

“Protect your own life.”

“Roger.”

……Where will they come from?

The handles of the crossed rods <Rosario> she held became sweaty. It was a trap conceived by the Yuugenshu to begin with, so it should know their location and be concealing itself nearby.

Silence.

The crystal world which spread out was filled with silence to the point that it hurt the ears.

……It's been a while since I've felt this silent tension.

She couldn't even wipe the sweat that went from her brow to the tip of her nose and to her lips. If she crumbled her stance for even an instant, she would be attacked from behind. It was that kind of deja vu feeling.

"You're too roused up."

"……My apologies. It's nerves."

"I'm praising you."

Those were unexpected words of compliment unsuited to this Sennenshi called Horn.

"A Guard who does not know the strength of the Yuugenshu can't be that cautious. It looks like you've piled on battle experience with Yuugenshu, including when you were an apprentice Priestess."

"……"

"I jumped to a hasty conclusion. I'll take back the words I said to you at Tenketsu Palace. It looks like you'll be moderately useful."

Sophia

She put her two machine pistols back in their holders and walked towards the large crystal ahead of her.

"!? Captain Horn!"

No way, she sheathed her guns?

That defenselessly. And this from the person who said not to approach the crystals unprepared!? That's like asking to be attacked."

"I'm telling you to attack me already."

The instant Horn's monologue echoed throughout the underground.

■ ■ ■, ■ ■ …… ■, ■ ■, …… ■, ■, ■ ■ ■ …… ■ ■

Oe/ Dia = U milve / x-recrey mihas I, xay xephnis xin sis.

A mysterious and heavy sound echoed through the crystal cavern.

Within the barrier of azure light, deep purple strands of light wove together into a strange pattern in the air.

“Mateki!?”

Crossing her crossed rods <Rosario>, she put together an opposing protective spell in her head.

However, the curse over her head did not fall regardless of how long she waited; it seemed to be getting sucked into the higher parts of the cave just like that.

Crick……

A dull sound came from the crystals jutting out of the ceiling. It wasn't one, but two and three. Each of them was far taller than they were and extremely heavy.

"Jump backwards!"

Horn shouted.

At the same time, the giant crystals lined up overhead caved in. The landslide with crystals mixed in closed in from above with a violent, thunderous noise.

——It decayed the ceiling with mateki's corrosion, huh !

"Gu……"

Dodging the dirt and sand, she deflected the crystal fragments with her crossed rods <Rosario>. Jumping to dodge the avalanche of earth and rocks that reached up to her knees, Monica jumped onto the nearby crystal——

"Nyaao……"

Shiver.

The cat-like cry came from directly behind her.

"Behind me!?"

What was before her when she turned around in a panic was a large black shadow. The mysterious beast with eight limbs upon its body which resembled a black leopard swooped down at her.

Its crimson eyes were filled with hostility.

"You're in plain view."

Those eyes were easily shot through with a silver bullet.

"!"

Even more silver bullets pierced the back of the beast which was turned. Continuing on, its eight legs which were planted on the ground were knocked out as a matter of course. With its balance destroyed, she aimed at its head and shot even more.

"The bullets with trajectories made with 'Celestial Map Drawing' were, so to speak, unavoidable magic bullets."

Horn's gunfire didn't cease.

The silver monad surface of the bullets had shinryoku carved into it and pierced the Yuugenshu's mateki bullet by bullet, wearing it away.

"You cannot dodge my bullets no matter where you might run."

A barrage filled its escape route and bullets broke its legs when it stopped. When it staggered, bouncing bullets pierced it from below. Even falling was not permitted. As if anticipating where it would fall —— no, it really was shooting done while seeing the future.

"……Amazing."

Catching a glimpse of a battle which could be called one-sided, Monica even forgot to breathe in her surprise.

……I thought I knew but to think it was to this extent.

The Yuugenshu was not allowed to counterattack, much less run or even expand all its energy and fall. What made this possible was Horn's sniping ability with her future sight granted by 'Celestial Map Drawing'.

……She's holding one of those machine pistols which should require two hands in each hand and being that accurate while firing so quickly.

The physical strength required to handle those hefty guns and the lithe shoulder muscles to distribute the recoil from firing. And above all, the fearsome concentration and force of will which made it possible to do that super precise shooting.

Is there anybody with more skill than this Sennenshi in long-range combat? When she asked that question, Monica had no confidence she could reply.

……I'll assist her. Like I can say that.

For example, Sheltis. His fighting style which challenged Yuugenshu to super close-range combat was filled with severity which dazzled onlookers' eyes. But what about her? Being only one-sided, it could not even be called a battle and would end with that one-sidedness.

"This is the end."

The Yuugenshu had its entire body pierced by bullets bestowed with shinryoku. The core crystal at its center

was pierced by the final bullet. The mist beast fell over while crying its death agonies, having exhausted all its energy, and didn't even twitch. Its body also grew faint and was dispersing.

"The S vector, eighth class was of this caliber, huh. This thing did that to Tessha……"

"Tessha?"

"……It's nothing; let's go. We'll find and exit and escape."

Putting back on her blinder, Horn turned around.

……

……What?

It was then that Monica felt discomfort.

The Yuugenshu had certainly fallen and the crystal core within it had been pierced by Captain Horn's bullet.

……But……I didn't hear the sound of the crystal core shattering?

"No way."

What lay before her as she hurriedly turned around was——

"Captain Horn!"

"Wha……"

Horn turned her head only halfway over and gasped, stiffening her whole body.

"……I see. So its true body is just like mateki. If the entire body isn't eliminated, it'll immediately multiply and regenerate."

The mist which should have been dispersing once again multiplied and solidified into the original beast shape.

"Nyaao……"

A cute cry —— she understood that wasn't to have them let down their guards. That was truly a 'coaxing voice'. The monster which boasted overwhelming strength was sneering at the weak.

"Fine."

The third Sennenshi once again tore off her blinder.

"I'll keep you company until you lose the will to regenerate."

Part 9

The silver smoke drifted up in a dense cloud.

It was not a darkish cloud of sand but sparkling particles of sand flying in the great salt lake air.

"Two approaching from behind."

"Tch……"

He spun around, raising water splashes. Bringing his twin swords directly across, he blew away the two Yuugenshu attacking him from behind.

■ ■, ■ …… ■ ■, ■ ■ ■, …… ■ …… ■ ■

Oe/ Dia = U xeph cley, Di shela teo phes kaon

The swelling dark purple light swooped down.

Fshhh……immediately after, the spot he had just been standing at —— on the ground touched by mateki, the water had turned to mist and the rock salt had melted.

“Super high heat, huh; you two, be careful!”

“Roger.”

“……Gimme a break.”

The two’s voices came from where they were fighting a ways away.

“They seem to still be energetic; that’s a relief.”

“It would be troubling otherwise.”

Their responses were proof that the two were safe. Then in the time Kagura and Vaiel were devoted to defense, he would eliminate at least one of the many Yuugenshu. It would be best to wear down the enemy’s

combat strength even a little before the reinforcement unit arrived.

……The best option would be to wipe them out but can we do that much?

"A new reading of three units has been detected to the north."

"There's an unusual amount of them."

He had already defeated five of them but rather than their numbers decreasing, they were rather increasing. It was difficult to imagine this many breaking through the barrier at once.

"They most likely came in with that time Hyouketsu Kyoukai was penetrated. You can think of them like the leftovers."

"The ones that didn't die and ran away, huh."

He stabbed his right-hand sword into the salt and swung it up from that position. Giant rock salt pieces floated high in midair and fell towards the Yuugenshu directly below. Not wanting to be crushed by giant weights, the monster evaded.

There, it was cut down with a single flash.

“Increasing response from a unit to the right. Please crush it before the mateki activates.”

“You’re such a slave driver. Kagura, there’s a unit over there as well!”

He left the Yuugenshu that passed by him to the two and those two sprinted at the Yuugenshu they set their eyes on. Swinging down his sword before the mateki activated, it was interrupted.

“Hey, youuu, are you done yet!”

“Operating at depth five virtual territory <Layer>. Charge completion before micro shinryoku overflow…… setting Machine (Machina) pearl’s internal carved seal to a thirty second limit ——— Release.”

Kagura threw Machine (Machina) pearl which she was holding into the air.

Machine (Machina) pearl which was wrapped in a faint green light split into innumerable pieces. Each of the parts which exceeded a hundred in number shined with the

colors of crimson, emerald, gold, azure and pure white, accompanied by their own unique sounds.

"……What's that?"

"Baptism, territory, barrier, worship. It's all five of the shinryoku types —— ahh, I see. I gave her some advice before and this is her response."

The five colors were mixed equally and bore a rainbow-colored radiance.

At the same time this blinding light which even surpassed the sun's rays fell upon the Yuugenshu, Vaiel who was upon the ground moved.

"Now, hit them!"

"You only have to say it once."

Closing the distance with a Yuugenshu who was drawing near, he sent it flying with by swinging his fist against the tip of its nose.

Piercing —— the fist which would normally be counterbalanced by a mateki barrier easily blew through the barrier and the body shrouded in mist.

"!?"

The mist beast let out a dying cry as it disappeared.

"……Hoo, I didn't think it would actually pierce the barrier."

"Fufun. How about it; isn't it amazing?"

Kagura rubbed Machine Machina pearl which descended.

"I was informed that it is easier to pierce the Yuugenshu's barrier not with a single high-powered shinryoku attack, but with multiple small ones. This was an application of that. It fires truly minute amounts of shinryoku out at a rate of several thousand per second over a wide range and erases the enemy's barrier."

"It's simple for machines, huh?"

"Yes. However, even within Tenketsu Palace, this is still in a trial stage. I am the first one to be personally equipped with it. As for why it's difficult, it is necessary to attach a large amount of shinryoku to the a machine which is inorganic so an advanced carved seal is…… mugyuu."

Sophia

"Ah— that's enough, it's annoying to listen to. Let's finish them off first."

Pushing down roughly on the girl's head, Vaiel forcefully stopped her from talking.

"A good decision and good support. Sheltis, please defeat them as quickly as possible. We should aim to clean up here even a moment quicker……and then confirm Monica's safety."

"Got it; you mean that crevice."

The underground lake which had become the den of large carnivorous beasts. It could possibly be as hot as magma. Bottomless quicksand. At the bottom of such a crevice, he had no idea what the environment was like so it was ominous.

"On top of that is that Yuugenshu. That……has a high chance of being one of the old types from a thousand years ago. I also believe its intelligence level to be extremely high."

"A thousand years ago?"

"Yes. They are far more powerful monsters than the current ones. You could say they are the perfect symbol of what Hyouketsu Kyoukai is meant to seal. It was most likely hiding here from before the barrier was erected."

Machine Ilis crystal' words were permeated with an unusual nervousness.

"Let's hurry. This is that serious of an opponent."

Part 10

"I'm sorry, my power was not enough."

Even now, Horn remembered those words spoken by the Priestess who came out of the purification room on that day.

"No matter how hard I tried……when there was just a little bit left before the purification was done, the mateki would multiply and regenerate itself. ……I've never seen anything like this before."

It was mateki which would multiply and regenerate itself before being completely eliminated no matter how much it was purified.

"I see, so the Priestesses have silently yielded."

Mateki that even the Priestesses gave up on purifying.

Horn was seeing how fearsome that was in reality.

"Nyaao……"

She couldn't hear that adorable cry as anything more than a strange sneer.

The mist which should have been hazily spread solidified in the air and supported the main body to its feet. At the same time its body which had been half-erased by shinryoku bullets was fully regenerated, it stood up as if nothing had happened. Rather than being a mist beast, it was more of a beast that was mist.

"……So this happens even if its head is completely destroyed."

There was absolutely no meaning to having shot the entirety of its head and more than half of its torso. Even if a single leg were to remain, it would immediately regenerate.

"Captain Horn!"

"Don't move; just focus on your spells."

She pierced Monica, who was about to run over, with her gaze.

"It's the same as before. Keep the barrier spell up at all times and if you have excess strength, time baptism spells to align with my shots and hammer them into it."

……Its regeneration is being somewhat hindered by this barrier but even then it still has this speed.

……It's shocking.

On top of that, it was troublesome that the opponent was gradually learning. It was memorizing the gun's piercing strength and speed while deploying the most appropriate barrier. It was showing that it wouldn't dodge the unavoidable magic bullets and instead was focusing on defense. And if there was an opening——

■ ■ ■, ■ ■ …… ■, ■ ■, …… ■, ■, ■ ■ ■ …… ■ ■

Oe/ Dia = U milve / x-recrey mihas I, xay xephnis xin sis.

"Tch!"

She jumped away to avoid the mateki which formed a giant circle. Placing a foot against the wall of gigantic crystals, she jumped to crystals which were even higher.

The eerily shining mateki wrapped everything up to the nearby crystals —— however, no changes occurred with the crystals. They didn't decay or crumble; they didn't even melt under super-high temperatures.

……That's the cause of Tessha's coma.

……Only that mateki requires caution.

"Now then, what to do."

There was no impatience. It was her bitter enemy whom she'd been chasing for many years so this level of strength was to be expected.

"Monica, can you still maintain the barrier?"

"Y-Yes. ……At this rate, I could hold it for a few days."

"Then we're changing strategies. Don't use Baptism spells and restrict yourself to Barrier spells; try to save stamina. It'll be a protracted battle."

There were two shots from her right-hand machine pistol and three from her left. A total of five shots pierced through the enemy's limbs without fail. Rushing to the side of the enemy which couldn't move, she fired another three shots at its head.

"You hide behind a crystal or something. If you don't directly provoke it, it will come for me first. ……There's no rush. After my reinforcements arrive, we'll settle this."

Other than her machine pistols, she had a rifle on her back, but these were not enough to finish this.

Then it was a simple matter: something with more power —— cannon-class power would be good enough. In the airship they had arrived on, there were also super powerful firearms for use against dragons. If the reinforcements were to carry those here, they would be able to wipe out Yuugenshu without a trace.

Ding!

"So you deflected the bullet."

It meant that the enemy's barrier had been adapted that far.

"Nyaao."

With its barrier still up, it used its body's springs and shot forward with explosive force. It was a form of combat it hadn't shown until now.

"You're trying to tell me you changed your fighting style too?"

She kicked off the crystal underfoot and flew into the air. She twisted her body and kicked once off a ceiling crystal, flew through the air from the reaction force and landed far away from the Yuugenshu.

The Yuugenshu which cut through the air continued on like that and crashed into a crystal. Immediately afterwards, an ear-splitting noise sounded and the crystal blew into countless fragments.

"……Just like your regenerative ability, that stupid strength is also appalling."

Bathed in the shower of falling fragments, the monster appeared without a wound.

……No.

……It is no problem. If my weapons arrive, it is an opponent I can certainly defeat.

“Nyaao.”

“I’d like this to be a short battle but I don’t have any intention of that.”

She continued to dodge the charging monster.

……Tessha, wait just a little longer. I will save you.

……I will be the one to save you where no Priestess could.

“You’re just a weakling who can’t love anybody except for the children from the orphanage!”

She remembered those words.

That Priestess……if Ymy Ele Soufflenictole who was acknowledged as the Priestess of Baptism was able to purify this, then nobody would have these harsh feelings .

"……Such flippant words."

Clenching her molars, Horn muttered that with loathing.

"How can a Priestess who can't even save a single child say that……!"

Look at reality.

She had chased down this Yuugenshu to where she could defeat it. Year after year, she had bowed her head to her older sister, Viola, caused her suffering and patrolled the harsh Biotope of her own will to continue seeking out the Yuugenshu. One's best and tenacity are that kind of thing.

"……I am a weakling? A coward? Not relying on anybody in Tenketsu Palace isn't acting strong!"

Sophia

The Priestesses of which not a single one could purify mateki.

There was no need to trust in Tenketsu (Sophia) Palace which revered those Priestesses nor the subordinates of that Tenketsu (Sophia) Palace. She merely had to make use of them as subordinates and there was no need to expect anymore from them.

Rather than the people of Tenketsu (Sophia) Palace, there was nothing wrong with special treatment for her friends at the orphanage which had raised her sister and herself.

……I am not mistaken.

……I should not be mistaken. Even so.

"Err……umm, I was fascinated by how amazing Captain Horn is."

"I……If I practice, will I be able to become like the Captain——"

……Why am I remembering Catria now?

But what of him? In the tower, he isn't a Priestess, apprentice Priestess or a Guard. Was there really a need to treat a maintenance boy harshly?

"……But she's cool."

"……Yeah. ……Also, she always leaves the gun maintenance to me."

Within the tower, he was the only boy that adored her.

He just innocently said that he wished to become her maintenance worker. Yes, he was attached to her just like the children from the orphanage.

On the day he was first assigned——

His eyes were shining like this underground crystal world.

"The Priestess named Ymy Ele Soufflenictole is…… very strong. Stronger than you or me, I believe that she carries stronger feelings than anyone."

"She was persuaded that she is the last hope and that cornered her into extending the Priestess training which should normally not be lengthened."

……That Cadet's words were the same.

Her older sister Viola would always come back weakened to the limit after training.

I hate night time —— it feels like I'll see a dream about training. Seeing her elder sister squatting on the bed while saying that, it was apparent just how harsh the Priestesses' training was even if she didn't want to know.

……I knew it all from the beginning.

Just how seriously that Priestess considers Tessha and I.

"Kuu!"

Why of all times would only excess random thoughts emerge now?

Even thought she should have severed herself from all connections to Tenketsu Palace.Sophia

……But.

……It’s the truth that Catria the maintenance worker and Ymy the Priestess and every person in the tower is putting forth their best to aid me.

……Since I can’t even acknowledge those two, I really am just like Ymy said——

“Captain!”

“!”

——When Horn came back to reality, the area ahead of her was filled with mateki.

■ ■ ■, ■ ■ …… ■, ■ ■, …… ■, ■, ■ ■ ■ …… ■ ■

Oe/ Dia = U milve / x-recrey mihas I, xay xephnis xin sis.

"Cra——"

……For me to lose focus in the middle of a battle.

Inwardly regretting it, she jumped back with all her might. Her back was on the point of freezing up at the sight of the spot she was just standing at being completely wrapped in mateki.

Crack.

The gigantic crystal which was bathed in mateki let off a sound at its base and crumbled.

"It's different?"

This effect was simple physical destruction. It's not the coma effect it was using until just now!?

The crystal which had become giant rubble descended from overhead. It was of such weight that she would suffocate under it without being able to move a bit.

"……I'm being mocked!"

Twisting her body, she dodged the continuous rain of falling rubble. She shot the smaller fragments with bullets to deflect them while jumping directly sideways ——

"Nyaao."

That voice came from right next to her ear.

No way……breaking the crystal with mateki was to direct me?

"!"

Without even time to turn around, she felt a large presence to her side.

In her peripheral vision, the eight-legged monster filled her view and pressed closer——

"Captain!?"

Nothing would make it in time.

The distance was too close for her to deflect it with simultaneous gunfire. Even with her firing speed, one or two shots would be the limit. But the Yuugenshu's shield was already at the point where that wouldn't break it.

……Think. ……A plan to break through this crisis .

……The response is……

There was no response.

Even with all her knowledge and techniques, she could not defeat the Yuugenshu charging at her. She intuitionally understood that.

"……It makes me hate myself from the bottom of my heart."

Failing so stupidly right at the end. If there was a subordinate that failed like this, she would normally start with chasing them out of the unit.

"……I can't laugh at that bunch at Tenketsu Palace."
Sophia

Struggle in vain?

Or——

With not even a second left before the Yuugenshu reached her, she had time for one shot. In that brief instant, Horn's right hand had cast aside her favored gun while she wasn't thinking.

She couldn't think of anything. No, she didn't have time to think.

While in that lost state, her right hand gripped a single gun.

And pulled its trigger.

A crimson flash.

"……Eh?"

Horn's excellent vision witnessed the phenomenon that occurred in that moment without fail. A single bullet had been wrapped in a crimson light and shot through the Yuugenshu's barrier and upper body.

A powerful mateki barrier and it went through easily.

“This, is?”

A definite weight was felt in her right hand.

It was a weight she hadn’t felt until now but the large silver gun felt familiar as if it were made specifically for her. That was.

“……Catria?”

“Catria.”

“Ye-Yeeeess!?”

“This was in my cargo, but what is it?”

“Uh……umm, it’s a new creation. Production code, ‘ Silver King <Rusty Heidt>‘……the gun’s slide and rifling are designed to be larger and it also uses special bullets.”

The gun christened Silver King <Rusty Heidt>.

She remembered having it pushed onto her by Catria at the airship.

"I wanted to make the bullets themselves in a new metallic structure. After making a request to a Priestess many times, I finally got a carved seal with a Priestess' baptism spell applied to it. It hasn't been tested, but it shouldn't be an exaggeration to call it a bullet specialized to Yuugenshu!"

"A Priestess' baptism spell meaning ane-ue's?"

"Ah, n-no. Viola-sama was always out of the tower so the best at baptism type spells——"

Specialized anti-Yuugenshu bullets.

It was not like like those until present which were only carved with shinryoku. Most likely, a Priestess had spent a great deal of time offering prayers and applying Baptism spells. She would have done it between regular training and forgone her own sleeping time to fill it with prayers.

Then the Priestess which granted this bullet this much power was?

"……"

She knew.

There was nobody else who could be referred to as the forerunner in Baptism.

"……That idiot."

She should have known. She should have also known that the one who would use this gun was me. Even so, that Priestess……not considering how much I've rejected her, she did this for my sake.

……

……That idiot sacrificed her own time for this.

"That's why……I don't like you, Ymy Ele Soufflenictole."

Catria as well.

Ymy as well.

Despite being treated that coldly by me, for my sake —— they have gone ahead themselves and become my strength.

……And this is.

……What that cheeky Priestess wanted of me for so long, huh.

The final chance she gave to me.

"……"

She took deep, deep breaths repeatedly.

"U-Umm! Not many bullets have been made so there are only three loaded….."

"I was wondering if I would just barely make it in time for the subjugation mission this time."

"Ten minutes."

She had two shots left.

She would get through ten minutes with those two shots.

"……And I'm sorry."

Biting down on her lip and facing forward, Horn pulled the trigger.

Silver King <Rusty Heidt>'s bullet —— the bullet which had a Baptism spell bestowed straight upon it split into twelve smaller pellets immediately after firing. Each of those little pellets pierced through the barrier and body of the Yuugenshu which had regenerated, gouging out large holes.

"!?"

The wavering beast let out a confused scream.

"Now, I offer my thanks to you."

The last bullet.

Facing her bitter enemy which whose body was already half annihilated, she calmly pulled the trigger.

The bullet shone silver and crimson. It pierced the Yuugenshu as if being swallowed up and completely destroyed it save one leg.

……So two shots weren't enough.

……Meaning my skills still have room to grow.

If even a single leg were left behind, it would regenerate. And Silver King <Rusty Heidt>'s bullet count was zero. If it were to regenerate, she would have nothing to shoot it with.

"_____"

Horn smiled and threw Silver King <Rusty Heidt> up high.

[Sia Sec elis arc……Is io miel]

[That day's dream, once more……for the sake of that.]

The leftover leg of the Yuugenshu was wrapped in even more crimson light.

Then.

The sound of a hard crystal shattering.

It was transmitted coldly, sharply and somehow sadly throughout the crystal world.

"I apologize, I disobeyed your orders."

Appearing from behind a crystal's shadow was the girl with sakura-colored hair. The final spell which had completely eliminated the Yuugenshu was hers.

"You said to limit myself to barrier spells but……"

"……No, this is fine."

She faced the troubled Cadet and shook her head, then looked up at the towering crystals.

……The thing I understood from the beginning but couldn't do.

The crystal world. A natural mirror which shined because of the sunlight flowing in. A very, very small smile appeared on her face which was reflected in that.

"I finally have the courage to face myself." [T/N: The kanji for "myself" is 弱 meaning "weakling/coward".]

Part 11

Gun and crossed rods <Rosario>. In a place away from where two people put away their respective weapons——

"Hey, Sheltis, come on, Sheltis."

"Shh. Quiet, Ilis, they'll hear us."

Covering Ilis who was blinking with liveliness, Sheltis once again hid himself in the shadow of the crystals.

"Mu—, I said it'd be fine if you went out. The one who subjugated the remaining Yuugenshu in this underground cave was you so it isn't it fine if you just grandly appear?"

"……Well, there's a mountain of stuff I want to do."

He held his dual swords in his hands.

Wiping the sweat flowing from his forehead, Sheltis slowly sat down.

"Ah—, that was tiring."

"Good work. That was fourteen aboveground and twenty five underground for a total of thirty nine. The average time taken was 12 minutes, 5 seconds and you also did well in keeping your injuries down to two light wounds. These are results enough to make a Priestess or Sennenshi go pale."

"……It seems like the underground was the Yuugenshu's home grounds."

He had a bad feeling when the Yuugenshu had split the surface of the great salt lake and appeared.

That S vector, eighth class did not invite them to that crevice to split their unit in two. It was to surround them with the Yuugenshu waiting underground.

"It was a silver lining that Monica was there."

"Truly."

If Monica had not quickly erected a shinryoku barrier, they would have been attacked by the Yuugenshu troops following the 'S vector, eighth class'.

——In reality, dozens of Yuugenshu had been waiting just outside Monica's barrier.

And the one who wiped them out was Sheltis.

"But you know, you should also thank me. Since I found the path through this underground cavern."

"……Wasn't that just a pitfall?"

He had Kagura and Vaiel stay aboveground to communicate with the reinforcements.

That left him to follow Ilis' guidance and charge into the Yuugenshu den alone. And just like that, he had entered a rough battle of which nobody knew.

He alone had wiped out the dozens of Yuugenshu in the crystal cavern.

For those who didn't know the circumstances, it was a number which would even cause Instructors to doubt their ears.

"But I'm glad."

"……Mm?"

"I just had a little feeling that something might change."

From the shadow of the crystals, he stealthily peeked in the direction the two were standing at.

——Horn was staring at her reflection in a crystal.

"Like I thought, Priestesses and Sennenshi have to get along."

A deep gap had separated Ymy and Horn.

The only ones who could repair that were the people in question. That was why all he could do was support them from the shadows at the conclusion.

"Helping repair Ymy's relations from behind the scenes, hmm. But you know, sometimes I want to have the chance to do showy things in the open."

"……That's all up to chance."

Machine Ilis crystal sighed and Sheltis answered that with a sigh of his own.

Part 12

"Everyone, I'm glad you're all safe."

Those were the words first spoken by Monica after she was rescued from the giant hole.

"I was worried. After we fell down, there was no support or response for a while, so I thought that perhaps you were also about to be attacked by Yuugenshu."

"……It wasn't just about to be."

"That's right. It was a hassle."

Kagura and Vaiel answered with dead tired expressions.

"Don't say that. It was hard on our end too. At any rate, it was a really troublesome one which no matter how many times we defeated it——"

"Right, that. Ilis and I were also worried but……it looks like everything went alright."

He didn't have time to check while fighting the Yuugenshu underground, but she didn't seem to have any injuries on her when he looked. He had more scratches on him.

"Captain Horn was the one who struggled so I was more of an extra."

She dug her nails into her unharmed formal wear in shame.

"That's wrong. The one who completely annihilated that was her."

The blinder-wearing woman lightly rested her hand on Monica's shoulder.

"My thanks; I was saved by your barrier."

"Eh? Ehh, eh…… wa-wait, Captain Horn!?"

"I merely spoke the truth."

The Sennenshi declared that plainly and turned around.

……Should I say it?

He was lost for a moment on whether he should speak.

“Wait.”

Sheltis called out to Horn who was about to walk away.

“What is it?”

“Thank you very much.”

“Mm?”

She had a dubious expression on her face as he bowed his head to her.

“Isn’t Monica unharmed because you put yourself at the front?”

The fully depleted Silver King <Rusty Heidt>. The machine pistol magazines all around her waist were also used up by a great deal. It had been that much of a rough battle.

"All according to plan. There's no idiot who would place a shinryoku spellcaster before the enemy. Also"

The tall woman slowly turned to him.

"I was indebted to you."

"Heh?"

"I'm interested in your background but I'll let it slide for now."

She turned away and walked away briskly.

……I see, so she really did notice.

"What's wrong, Sheltis?"

"Eh? No, I don't really understand it well."

He folded his arms and thought. By the way, he had already asked Kagura and Vaiel to keep it a secret from Monica that he had headed underground by himself.

And——

"That"

Horn, who was walking at the head of the group, suddenly came to a stop.

"Wa, wawaa……Captain Horn, I'm glad to see you're safe!"

The boy with heavy firearms in both hands ran up to the blinder-wearing Sennenshi. He should have been in overalls but now he was wearing camouflaged battle clothes.

"Catria, what is that outfit for?"

"B-Because, because. 'Bring a stronger weapon'. It was a Yuugenshu even Silver King <Rusty Heidt> couldn't defeat, right? For that kind of opponent, I-I thought I would also need to fight!"

"……Ahh. About that, your new gun was helpful."

Horn replied with a strangely awkward expression.

"Eh, i-is that right!"

"But that doesn't mean a maintenance worker should join the reinforcements unit. Somebody who doesn't

even know how to fire a gun shouldn't come out onto the battlefield."

"……My apologies."

The boy stared at the heavy firearms in his hands with a downcast expression.

"……I won't say it again."

"If you have a break from work, tell me ahead of time."

"Eh?"

In front of the boy who had his mouth hanging open absentmindedly, the Sennenshi averted her face for some reason and mumbled.

"……I'll at least teach you how to handle a gun."

"Ehh, ehhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!?"

"What is it?"

"B-Because, Captain Horn is……saying such kind words to me. Th-This is bad. You must have been hit with mateki and gone strange in the head——"

"Quiet."

A fist sunk into Catria's face with an unpleasant sound . Monica and the others who shuddered at the full-strength hit and the person who clenched that fist grabbed the boy by his collar.

"Come to think of it, Catria, how about the report to the executives?"

"A-All done! Everyone was relieved that the subjugation is complete."

"I see……"

She muttered that as if talking to herself, then the female Sennenshi looked up at the sky.

"……The only thing left now is Tessha."

There was no mistake that the one she defeated was the S vector, eighth class she had been chasing for many

years. There was one concern left —— whether or not defeating the main body had managed to also erase the mateki eating away at the boy.

"Let's have faith. Also, that it's not the delayed sin-type mateki."

"……Yeah."

That was mateki which became a stronger curse after its defeat. If mateki which the Priestesses couldn't cure were to become even stronger, nothing could be done about it.

The only thing they could do was have faith.

In what they had come to do. As well as the meaning in what Horn Nova had spent years continuing.

"I'll confirm it with the doctor in charge of the hospital . Sorry, but please wait a bit."

Placing the communicator to her ear, Horn was silent. However.

"……Why……is no one answering?"

Her whisper said everything with utmost cruelty.

"Is this Horn-sama?"

A nurse working at the hospital was heard from the communicator.

"What is it? Where is Tessha's doctor——"

"Th-The doctor……he just ran to D ward and hasn't come back yet! U-Um, he said that a patient's condition had suddenly worsened."

"……Don't tell me, is it D09?"

"I-I don't know but it was the patient in the innermost room. ……Ah, h-hello, Horn-sama!?"

Clatter……

The communicator slipped from Horn's hand which had lost its strength and fell.

"————Why?"

Both her knees touched the ground followed by both hands. A sob leaked from the lips which the Sennenshi was biting down on hard enough to draw blood.

Delayed sin-type mateki. There was no way to stop the curse strength which had lost its control. It was of a strength which Priestesses couldn't cure even before running out of control. There was no way they could deal with it.

"Why……nothing has paid off……I……what I've done so far, not a single thing has"

"It will pay off, definitely."

That voice.

From the communicator which had fallen to the ground, it was carried along the silver wind flowing to the great salt lake.

"I've heard the report. You defeated that Yuugenshu. ……That's why, after that, you must believe. In what you have done. And in me."

"……Ymy?"

Whispering that with a sob mixed in, Horn Nova slightly lifted her face.

"Tessha-kun's mateki was of the delayed sin type as I suspected. Because the main body was annihilated, his mateki has undergone a change. ……We don't even have an hour to spare. I will be heading to D09 to perform a purification now. The supervising doctor is making preparations."

"……"

"Are you uneasy? That I'm performing the purification ."

Horn didn't answer.

"……Please have faith and wait. Well then——"

"Wait."

Horn's hand once again gripped the communicator.

Such that everyone there could hear, she stood up and then.

"——I'm sorry."

The third Sennenshi lowered her head towards the communicator.

"……I am thankful that you are at Tenketsu (Sophia) Palace."

"Horn-san?"

"I entrust Tessha to you."

Part 13

Tenketsu (Sophia) Palace, internal hospital.

"Yes. I will save him for sure."

With one eye closed while facing the communicator, Ymy quietly breathed in.

"……"

In front of her when she turned around was an enormous steel door which was shut firmly. This was already D ward. It was the floor for patients contaminated with powerful mateki who absolutely could not be helped with regular treatments.

It was one of the quietest places in the tower.

Everything from the ceiling to the corridor was covered in formal carved seals letting off bluish-white light. A single person was in the hall which was filled with the radiance of shinryoku, heading absolutely straight to the furthest depths.

"Sorry to keep you waiting."

Room D09. The attending doctor stood in front of its door.

"As you directed, the evacuation of attending doctors and apprentice Priestesses from around this room has been completed."

"……Okay. I'll tell you when I'm done so please don't let anyone enter until then."

The attending doctor saw Ymy off as she walked up to the door.

……This is.

The instant she entered, her breath caught at the unnatural airflow.

The room was filled with deep purple mist.

The ceiling, walls and floor: every single thing was supposed to be one color by they were now dyed purple.

"This entire room is dyed with mateki."

The sweat flowing down her cheek was cold enough to make her shiver.

……Such thick mateki.

It was almost as if this area had become a miniature Garden of Eden Corrupted Song. A regular person would be cursed by the mateki just by breathing. It was an outrageous density.

[Unto me, all the wishes that of which I am able……]

[ele So Phi-a-s Arma-Riris]

Release precedent.

Particles shining with crimson light floated in the air and hazily wrapped her body.

……I must do what I could not do yesterday.

“_____”

A single boy continued to slumber while attached to an artificial respirator. He was wearing a patient’s gown for children and continued seeing a dream without waking from his coma.

O seven colors of the interweaving dream

Yu/ ubinis ole = C kis tih Ies.

The slumbering spring’s rest is at an end, wishing, the augite that awakens with the path.

mios huda yum xeph fel hypne shel sephat, xephnis wision.

——Strange purple patterns emerged from his entire body.

It formed a complete contrast with the formal wear with shinryoku carved seals, nevi that looked as if a curse were carved straight onto the body had clearly emerged from his entire body.

"……I will save you this time."

She gripped the hand of the boy whose eyes were shut and hugged that delicate body strongly.

Now in this place, the accumulated songs of praise, the quivering pulsations, arrive at the heavenly sound.

mehnes nelar, Ee toga-s-sia vea clar = C nelves zahl tis kyel Sophit.

The pouring drops, lovingly fill and run towards the fated time.

kei yum lisy r-blow-s-miel xins clue Is-Ye-fio missin.

O wishes, become the path of thousands of hopes.

Ris sia sophia, shel evoia steras tis lef ilis.

The Priestess' prayer. Failure was not permitted.

Not for my sake, nor for Horn's, but for this child's sake.

……What I have trained so far. For a long, long time.

……Everything was for the sake of today.

———For the time the world is filled with prayers, I sing.

Yu/ Se = C clar fears valen r-miel noi I.

The crimson lights purifying the mateki become tens of times brighter in one instant.

The band of light was reminiscent of an aurora. The instant the deep purple mist wrapping the entirety of the room touched that, it disappeared with a twinkle like snow in the sunlight.

……

……It's being purified?

The room was regaining its pure whiteness. What was left was the boy who served as the source of the mateki. The ominous nevi were also disappearing quickly starting from the extremities, his arms and legs.

……Just a little more, just a little more.

The nevi at his stomach disappeared, and then the nevi from his chest to his neck, and even those at his shoulders were disappearing. Now if only the nevi with the mateki whose curse was strongest on his face and

head were to disappear, the purification would be complete.

The shinryoku light climbed up from the base of his neck and the nevi disappeared in tandem. Just when she thought the crimson light was moving from his chin to his head.

Riii, i……iiiiii……nnnn……n……

The shinryoku lights became smaller particles and were deflected.

"……Eh?"

What happened? The purification isn't over yet; the most essential part of this child's purification is still left. The mateki which serves as the origin of his coma isn't gone yet.

"I-It's some kind……of mistake, right?"

Once more, one more try.

She strongly hugged the boy and once again spun the words of prayer. She wrapped her body in shinryoku to her limits and——

That light was once again rejected by the mateki eating away at the boy.

Mateki propagation. While she was doing that, the mateki nevi gradually returned from his neck to his shoulders and from his shoulders to his chest. The contamination had started again.

"……It can't……be."

It escaped the limits of her power. The mateki had clashed head-on with her shinryoku which should be the greatest in quantity of all the Priestesses and she didn't even counterbalance it.

……It's the same phenomenon as when I challenged the Yuugenshu from a thousand years ago.

……Then the Yuugenshu that attacked this child was a strong type of the same strength?

No way, there are remnants of those powerful ones from a thousand years ago left on the floating continent? And defeating one would only cause the mateki to turn malignant.

Orbie Clar

……That kind of thing……how do we counter it……

"Don't……lose hearttt!"

She opened her eyes and bit on her lip hard enough to draw blood.

Even if I try to think of a countermeasure, there's no point. There's no other way except for me to exhaust myself to the point of collapse time after time, however many dozens of times.

[Unto me, all the wishes that of which I am able……]

[ele So Phi-a-s Arma-Riris]

The second release precedent.

"After all……I am a Priestess."

It wasn't responsibility or duty. She became a Priestess because she decided that was what she wanted to do. Being taught by Meimel, trying her best along with Syun-rei, having her previous senpai return and, above all, her important childhood friend had returned to the tower——

……Because I like it!

That's why I want to do my best.

Orbie Clar

On this the floating continent, in this tower, I like doing my best together with everyone!

"So pleaseeeee!"

She concentrated on the spell hard enough to faint and held the boy as hard as she could……

That shinryoku shattered with a noise.

The overflowing deep purple mateki became even darker and only multiplied.

"……"

Sorry. She didn't even have the strength to think of that word.

Her vision grew dim and something hot overflowed from the tip of her eyelids……it felt like something very important within her had come to a halt.

The boy who continued to sleep was pushed over and Ymy collapsed at that spot.

_____

_____

Within her consciousness which had been lost.

She heard a song.

In a far-off, distant place.

A nostalgic song in a nostalgic place.

……Somebody……a girl is……singing?

……Who is it?

“Me.“

……Who is……me?

“I am myself. The form which your shinryoku < strength> shall arrive at and the existence which lies ahead of your possibilities.“

Giggle, giggle.

Only the girl’s smile echoed like a song.

[I am crimson A great mother and a girl]

[En Ze lu la clue. Zeul la ilmei Zelah -di- mis.]

[Made into a complete will, a single fragment of the great Selah]

[Zewl la elmei-l-phenoris Ema -di- lement lef Selah.]

[Governing the records of times of strife, forming knowledge with love. Its symbol]

[Sera, Zewl la clue-l-sophie neckt. tes Arma Risis.]

……What is……she saying?

……I don't understand.

"But you can hear my words, right?"

I can hear them.

But where am I hearing them from? It's not through my ears; it's a strange throb almost like I'm talking to myself.

"Congratulations."

That voice became somewhat lively.

"You who can hear my voice. You can finally awaken. Within this frozen, sleeping world, you will be able to walk with your own feet."

Frozen, sleeping world……walk? Where have I heard those words?

“O sleeping children Your legs are still weak This frozen land is still pained“

“=C hypn phenoria, Eec wat nes ei getie bis kills cley kis ei mihas“

……That’s right, come to think of it.

楽園幻想

Armariis Elma

—アマリリス独界—

En Se et rein cornis cl

elmei bediws, Uhw kis tinny lef hypne tes me

Sa pheno-isel noi elenis kamyu, nefit Uhz yulis —

Ao! De elmei nett, yehle valen steras tury Kyel-fe

Ao! De clue nett, shela elmei-I-pheno dio Kyel-f

Ao! Sera, meh mutis evhe, Ahw edel noi Egunl lin

Sera clar yehle R

Sera, van bie clar d-I-ele pha Sec lih

Ao! De Orbie Clar, nemne Ses colin hypn

Ec pheno steris pheno yum yulis fel Sec nuel, enc

Sera yum r-vequs noi shadilis kaon lef solitis x

Ao! Sa-Ph-Ye-clar ria Eeo, nefit elmei pheno delis Sec

was Kiris reh jas, van Ec yuma iflis……

Elma sia Risis ele Selahphenori

Miqu, clue-I-solitis mis cela

Ao! Sia sophia, leide-lis, clue-I-sophie neckt rei

——Kyel-fes Sophit ele vel xeph……

There should have been a line like that in the Priestesses' Seventh Heaven Rhythm <Sophia Code>——

"Now, O children who have been born"

After the girl sung loudly.

"If the world desires you, then I shall teach you a grand chant."

——Ymy's consciousness sunk somewhere very, very deep.

A world filled with something that seemed like black water of pure darkness.

It was like the night sky.

What twinkled there were not stars but large and small frozen crystals. They were an azure which reminded her of Hyouketsu Kyoukai's crystals.

……Why……is that in this world?

"……Where is this?"

Ymy absentmindedly drifted in this space whose atmosphere had a strange density to it like water.

“This is a solitary world. My world.“

A red light shined before her eyes and a conspicuously large crystal appeared.

“A world filled with frozen crystals. Nice to meet you, Ymy. Ymy Ele Soufflenictole, I have awaited you for a long time.“

A shadow of small stature could be faintly seen within the frozen crystal.

……It’s a girl.

……A girl with crimson hair.

The radiance of crimson which was the symbol of Baptism. The girl who was producing as well as endowed with that color.

“……You know me?”

"I am the records of everything in this world. For I am the original of that which you know as 'Mikuva's Crimson Eye'."

"!"

Mikuva's Crimson Eye. That should have been the treasure that the Governmental Sector secretly had.

It was a shinryoku system which would monitor everything about the floating continent and record it. But ……no way. The girl before my eyes is……the original of that treasure?

Orbie Clar

"The harsh and pure truth. That is why I am the Forbidden Crystal of this world."

"Forbidden Crystal……"

She strangely had heard those words before. She didn't know who had said it or where. But sometime, somewhere, she had heard them. That was what she felt.

"……"

Within the frozen ice, the girl spread both hands.

"This world is a mirror. Two opposing sides filled by a single component.

the floating continent (Orbie Clar) and the
Garden of Corrupted Song (Eden).

Shinryoku and mateki.

And slumber and awakening."

Slumber. With that word, Ymy finally remembered her mission.

"U-Um……sorry. I have a child I must save. So please, tell me……where is this? Send me back!"

"Were you to return, the current you cannot save that child."

"……Then……what should I do!"

"I told you. You will awaken here. If you awaken, then you should also be able to awaken a sleeping child."

What does that mean?

I am not…..yet awoken?

"You form the contrast with the boy who fell to paradise. If perchance you hear my voice……I shall teach you the true Seventh Heaven Rhythm <Sophia Code>."

The girl who named herself as the Forbidden Crystal loosened her expression.

"The Seventh Heaven Rhythm <Sophia Code> which invites the world into slumber. The Seventh True Rhythm <Eden Code> which reawakens that world. Two lives which would normally never intersect. However, if by chance you reach the deepest parts of the Garden of Eden Corrupted Song, at that time——"

"……At that time"

"You must ascertain that for yourself. I will be naught but the opportunity."

The Forbidden Crystal proclaimed those words.

She remembered hearing those exact words previously in the Grand Sanctuary.

"Change. There is an absolute lack of opportunities for your shinryoku to bloom."

"……Ah."

She felt that she had finally come to an understanding.

About the meaning of those words back then. The reason she caught a glimpse of the world a thousand years ago.

"Congratulations. You have reached it. The cries of your heart summoned me so I shall also impart a gift to you. A valuable gift."

The Forbidden Crystal encased in a block of ice extended a hand.

That hand slipped through the water's surface……

"Ah……"

Her fingers stroked my off-gold hair gently. It was gentle like a mother combing her child's hair.

"I've waited always. Always……always……for the chance that I would be released."

Flutter. A warm light gradually illuminated the night-colored world.

A crimson light.

……It's blinding.

Wrapped in the current of light which wouldn't let her open her eyes, Ymy reflexively closed her eyes.

"I entrust you with my power and the door to 'The Promised Land <Tsarabell>'."

"W-Wait————! You are, you are————"

浮遊大陸オービエ・クレア

Orbie Clar

—約束の歌—

vel harp riris noi elmei bediws, Uhw kis tinsy
Ec pheno r-isel noi elenis kamyu,
Ris sia sophia, De elmei nett, yehle
Ris sia sophia, De clue nett, shela
meh getie lishe, meh mutis evhe, Ahw

Sera, van bie clar
Ao/ De Orbie Clar,
Ec pheno, steris pheno yuna yulis
Sew yum r-vequs noi shadils
Sew ele sis xeph-Ye-clar ria Eeo, nefit
was Kiris reh jas, ven
Elma sia Risis
Miqu, clue
Ris sia sophia, leide-lis,
——Kyel-fes Sophil

The world was filled with light.

Chasing after the disappearing visage of the Forbidden Crystal, Ymy desperately reached out her hand.

The instant that hand touched the girl's fingertips.

Ymy lost consciousness once more.

Part 14

Tenketsu Palace (Sophia), floor 22, internal hospital.

Horn ran through the hallway of D ward which was isolated by a giant door.

"Further ahead?"

"Th-That's right! But……there still hasn't been a report about Ymy-sama's treatment ending."

Running alongside Horn was a nurse.

……It's been about two hours since we returned to the tower from the great salt lake.

……It's normally unthinkable for a purification spell to last two hours.

"Ymy……is safe, right?"

"Monica, Kagura and Vaiel are undergoing post-battle diagnosis by a doctor. After that's over, they'll immediately head to D ward. So——"

"We'll go there without telling them we're going on ahead."

A tinge of unease pressed down within his chest as Sheltis followed after the two before him.

"Purifying that mateki which has undergone a change because of the main body's elimination……poses a risk of calling danger to the spell caster, Ymy."

"……So the worst case scenario is a possibility."

The effectiveness of a Baptism spell would change greatly depending on the shinryoku output. There were

examples of using too much strength to purify mateki placing too heavy a strain on the spell caster's mind and body, leaving them beyond recovery.

"If it were an apprentice Priestess' purification, there would be a several people watching."

Ymy was a Priestess. There was nobody who could stop her. Even if that were not the case, especially for this time, she would sacrifice anything to save the patient.

……Please be safe.

……The patient, and Ymy as well.

"_____"

Clenching his fist solidly as he prayed, Sheltis followed after Horn.

"! Horn-sama……"

A voice of surprise came from the attending doctor standing in front of the door.

"How's Ymy!? How is Tessha's healing!?"

"Th-There's still been no report. She should be able to come out when it's finished……"

"——I understand the situation. I'm using my authority to open this door. Okay?"

Allowing the attending doctor to step aside, Horn pushed open the door.

Then.

Sheltis stepped into the room after Horn and doubted his eyes.

The room was pure white and the white curtains swayed with the wind from the window. The boy clothed in a white patients gown. And the figure of the girl holding that boy as seen from behind.

The girl's crimson hair flowed in the wind.

……It's not Ymy?

Even though his childhood friend with off-gold hair should be here, it was a different girl standing there.

"……You are?"

Horn wordlessly approached the lone girl.

The girl also turned to them.

"————Yesh?"

A befuddled voice unsuited to the location.

"Is that……you, Ymy Ele Soufflenictole?"

"Eh? Ah, y-yes. ……Wait, eh? Is something wrong?"

Ymy tilted her head while still holding onto the boy.

"No, but your hair——"

In front of Horn's outstretched finger, the crimson from Ymy's hair fluttered off into the sunlight. Those were particles of crimson that had adhered to her hair.

"……So that's it. It was just Baptism shinryoku dyeing her hair. Ahh, that surprised me. You really resembled that."

Machine Ilis crystal at his chest sighed in relief.

"! That's right, how's Tessha! Is the purification over!"

"……"

The Priestess did not answer the Sennenshi who said several things at once.

Instead of an answer, she silently handed over the boy she was clutching.

"……Tessha."

The boy's artificial respirator had been removed. It was slight, but his chest was moving up and down. He was breathing with his own strength of his own will. After that.

"……"

Weak and fickle though it may have been, his eyes surely opened.

"……Nee……ch……a"

"_____"

Horn went to her knees while holding the boy.

"……I'm glad. Truly……"

Droplets passed through the blinder.

"It has been a long time……I wondered if it was hopeless how many times……I'd almost given up."

That was definitely the first time she had shown that at Tenketsu Palace —— those were the 'complaints' that she had endured all this time.

Sophia

"——Phew."

Beside Horn who was hugging the boy, Ymy firmly puffed out her chest and turned to him.

"Well? Isn't that amazing? It's surprising, isn't it, the purification of the mateki was done in one go!"

With a full-face smile that blew away the damp atmosphere, his childhood friend balled her fist.

"Now, now? Don't you have something to say to me?"

"……Well, isn't that amazing."

"No, no! More like, like, you knowww."

"Then, umm——"

Being looked at with eyes of expectation, Sheltis suddenly leaked out a wry smile.

"You did well; good work."

"……Ehehe, thank you."

The Priestess smiled with embarrassment and happiness.

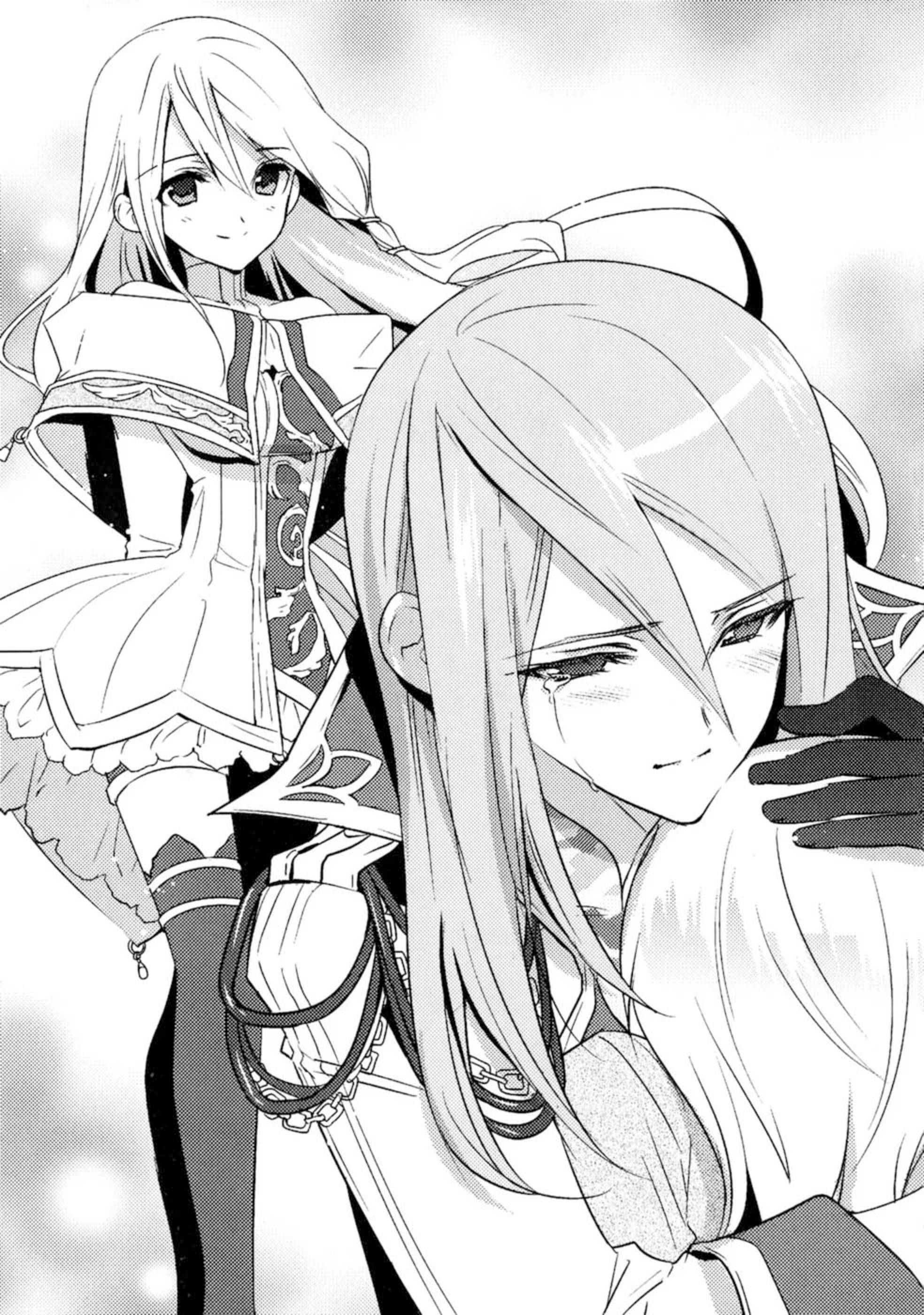
"You're simple, aren't youuu."

"I-Isn't that fine! Anybody would be happy to receive praise. I-It's not like……that's why I'm a Priestess……"

Ymy's face went red at Machine Ilis crystal' prodding.

"A-Anyway, this solves one problem. I need to report to Meimel and the others——"

"Hoo. Well then. Then it'll be fine for you to tell our story too, Priestess?"



That voice that he didn't know came from directly behind in the direction of the door.

"Ahh, sorry, it looks like I've interrupted a fun mood. Since that's how it is, let us in on it too. Right, Kuro?"

"……Huick-sama, even though I told you so much to read the atmosphere."

A tall man was leaning casually up against the door frame.

And waiting behind him was one more person, a woman in a suit.

……Their presences.

……They got this close without me realizing it?

No matter how much his attention was drawn by talking with Ymy, even if a Regular Guard were to pay attention to masking their footsteps, he was confident he would notice. Even so.

"Who are you?"

Still holding Tessha, Horn drew out an automatic pistol.

"State your affiliation, name and purpose in coming here within fifteen seconds. If not——"

"Yes, yes. Not like I had any intention of hiding them."

But the man who had a gun shoved up against his nose didn't falter from his calm expression.

"First, my intention —— ahh, this isn't really anything major. I came from quite a ways away so I thought I might as well observe. You guys are also observing us quite harshly, aren't you?"

"A question. Who is us?"

"The Governmental Sector. Didn't that Priestess over there and that Guard nii-chan over there come? That time , it seems like a muscle-headed idiot of ours was really in your care."

"……"

The suited woman wordlessly bowed.

“Next question. Who is this muscle-headed idiot?”

“Right, that nii-chan over there actually fought him so he should remember. About our ‘Number One‘.”

He said that with a cackle, enjoyment and resignation.

——The Governmental Sector. And the man who was known as the ‘Number One‘.

“Zeadoll of the Sanctuary Arts……?”

“Yeah, that guy, that guy. Nah, it’s because that muscle-headed idiot praised someone which is rare so we’d also very much like to meticulously adore them.”

The man drew near and straightened up.

Standing right beside the woman in a suit, the man pointed at himself and made a proclamation.

“‘Number Nine‘ Huick of the Governmental Sector secret military organization, ‘Heaven’s Wheel‘. I took all the time to come out here, so try being grateful?”

Epilogue – Those Who Have Gathered

Part 1

Sunlight poured through the colorful stained glass. The sunlight reflected the glass' color and like that, decorated the pure white hallway with innumerable colors.

"Oh……ohhh."

It was just like a hallway of light. The quiet holy grounds stretched out endlessly.

Tenketsu (Sophia) Palace, floor 290.

This was the floor directly under 'Paradise', the summit of of this super tall tower with 291 floors.

Starting with the Priestesses, only a portion of a handful of ranks could operate the elevator leading to this floor.

"It……It's too amazing. Such gaudy……ah, no, that's wrong, huuuh. Magnificent?"

Calling it gaudy would be heard as meaning extravagant. She had said it with exactly the opposite meaning. There was naught but natural light and sounds on this floor.

"It's an amazing place, right, Yuto?"

"Right—. Eyri-nee."

Holding the skipping Yuto's hand, Eyriey walked down the soundless corridor.

"……Were we really meeting in this kind of place?"

She felt like they had come to a ridiculously out-of-place spot.

"At around ten in the morning tomorrow, come to floor 290 of the tower."

……The person called Tsali said this was it.

"But I'm pretty sure this was where the Queen lives——"

"Eyriey-san."

A girl with hair the color of reflective water was standing before a door large to the point of being able to look up at it.

"……I showed you an embarrassing thing yesterday."

"Ohh, it's Shasa! Are you doing good, or rather, are you alright? Are you really okay?"

"Y-Yes. I was sleeping up until not too long ago today."

"Ah, that's true. You've got bed hair here."

"Ehhh? B-Bed hair? Where, where is it?"

Shasa frantically combed her back hair.

"Ahaha, it's fine if you don't worry about it. More importantly, that's a really big door."

"This? This is——"

Shasa turned around and narrowed her eyes in front of the towering door.

The giant metal door which was large enough to look up at. Upon the silver which glistened like water's surface, each important point was decorated with gold and sky-blue. This much of a grand of a display of colors would be imprinted upon the viewer like an attack but for some strange reason, this door did not give that impression.

"The door which continues on to Queen Salah's personal room, 'Curtain of Dreams'."

"This is……"

Even Eyriey who lived in the Living Districts had heard of it.

The relaxation room for the Queen who held absolute authority within Tenketsu Palace. It was the quietest holy grounds in the world for the sake of the Queen's three days of rest after a month of praying for Hyouketsu Kyoukai.

Sophia

"By the way, where are we going?"

"Ah, that's right—. ……I guess inside the tower really is fine. Since Shasa-chan's so informed. Is there any place to have fun?"

She was still worried about Shasa's condition so it would be best to play inside rather than outside as much as possible.

"It's hard to think of a place that's made to have fun. It is after all a building made solely for practicality. Even though it's this grand, there's no space for what you spoke of."

"That makes sense. Then……okay, got it! Leave it up to me. My friend's a Cadet Guard so let's get him to let us use his room!"

"Eyri-nee? Are you talking about Shel-nii's room?"

"Yup, yup, I also got a duplicate key fu—lly prepared. "

"In truth, that duplicate key is illegal but it'll be fine in this case……Eyriey-san, you're such a bad person."

Shasa's expression lightened with a giggle.

"Then it's decided! Well, let's go."

"If it's okay, could we take a little detour before that?"

"Oyo? What? Do you have somewhere you want to go ?"

"Yes. Follow me please. The elevator on this floor is connected to all floors in the tower."

Tenketsu (Sophia) Palace, floor 269.

It was a floor which was entirely divided into clean-cut square rooms.

"Hey, hey, Shasa-chan, where is this?"

"It's the meeting floor. It's used by the Elite Guards but this floor is reserved at the moment. ……It seems that a rare customer has come."

"Eh? You just said it's reserved."

Wasn't it bad for them to have entered?

"It's fine; I just want to take a peek secretly. I can hear what they're talking about with telepathy and understand the situation with clairvoyance."

"Ohh……amazing. Come to think of it, you can use shinryoku. Yeahhh—, that was surprising back then. We first met at Tenketsu Palace's large baths and you suddenly——"

Sophia

"Y-You already promised not to talk about that!"

The girl's face flushed and she shook her head.

"Rather than that, look. Over there."

"Eh? Where?"

Eyriey eyes bored in the direction that Shasa's finger pointed at.

"Please don't say anything. Look, that inner meeting room that Priestess Meimel is entering right now."

Part 2

Meeting room 269-F.

The room which was right at the center of the floor was already filled with many personnel.

“O—i, is Meimel still not hereee. I’m about to die from boredom.”

“Ishtar as well, she’s really lonely without I’sa-chan… …”

Hey, Leon, what does that have to do with calling me? There’s plainly a big rank difference between me and everyone else.”

“Shut up. To begin with, the start of this is your acquaintance ‘Number One‘ Zeadoll or whatever it was. This is also to hear your circumstances.”

“……No, it’s not like it’s at the point where you would call him my acquaintance.”

“I see, so because of that, we got wrapped up in something troublesome again.”

“You can’t get bored being in this room.”

"……The tension is making my stomach hurt."

"A-Are you okay? Monica-senpai, stay strong. Would you like some digestives?"

"Hey, hey, Sheltisss. The cute Ilis feels like having a paid yearly vacation soon."

"Oka—y, thanks for waiting everyone; look this way."

Meimel clapped her hands and everyone in the meeting room turned at once.

"Uh—mm……one, two……there are a lot of you. I wonder if everyone's here. Shall we do a little attendance checking? Everyone, when your name is called, respond in a spirited voice——"

"Everyone's here. Rather, Meimel, you're the only one late."

Ran was seated on a folding chair.

"It's fiiine—. Within three minutes isn't called late."

With a refreshing smile, the tall Priestess turned around. A smiling expression. ——With a gaze that didn't give a shred of a feeling of hostility or doubt.

"Well then, shall we start by giving our respective introductions?"

"Ahh, don't worry about that."

At the center of the meeting room.

A man bound to a chair shook his head.

"There are two Priestesses. Their names are Meimel and Ymy. Behind them are the Sennenshi, Ran and Leon. Orbie Clar Both are the best on the floating continent in their respectives fields of barehanded and great sword combat . And the one over there staring at a picture of her little sister is the Cadres Guard, Ishtar. The nii-chan behind her is Sheltis and the one beside him who looks like her stomach is in pain is the unit captain, Monica, right? The one in the back who looks like he detests this from the bottom of his heart is Vaiel and the one with a huuuge hat is Kagura. All of them are Cadet Guards. If I got anything wrong, please point it out."

"Oh my, that's amazing. Not just the Priestesses and Sennenshi—. You even remembered the Cadet Guards' names."

Meimel spoke with a look of praise.

"I should at least endeavor to remember the faces of those who came to our place. Riiight, Kuro?" [T/N: "our place" written as "Governmental Sector".]

"Right. Though I'm the one who did all the investigating."

"……That was unnecessary, Kuro."

A long, long sigh.

Or so they thought, but that man looked straight up at Meimel who was looking down at him.

"So tell me one thing. Why am I bound to this uncool folding chair? I've been like this since yesterday for a whole night so my backside's starting to hurt a little."

"Well, that would be because we can't just let an unknown intruder just freely do what they want.

Yesterday, you even entered D ward which has restricted access.”

“But you know. I’m wrapped up like this and Kuro —— my subordinate had a proper seat prepared for her. She even has black tea and snacks.”

In his bound state, he pointed towards the woman seated beside him with his chin. She was seated elegantly and quietly had the teacup against her lips.

“Isn’t this gender inequality?”

“Huick-sama, this is a distinction wrought by the difference in first impressions. So to speak, character, dignity, personal appearance, refinement and other various things that show habitually during everyday activities.”

“……Whose side are you on?”

The man sighed with a weary expression.

“Well, whatever. Come on, ask me anything; I’ll just say this ahead of time, but I didn’t come here for a fight

or anything. Even so, what's with this extravagant gathering? It's close to half of those at the top of Tenketsu Palace."

Sophia

"Everybody likes festivals."

"Hoo……"

"Well, let's put jokes aside. After all, you're from the Governmental Sector's secret military organization. That's a special unit belonging to Tenketsu Palace's rival, so I would be too scared to face you alone. First, let's start with whether your named affiliation is true."

Sophia

"'Number Nine' Huick of the Governmental Sector secret military organization."

"The one who'd know the most about that is the Cadet Guard nii-chan over there."

Huick's gaze went past Meimel's flank and——

"You."

"……Me?"

Leon elbowed him and Sheltis blinked.

"That's right. We're talking about that muscle-headed idiot so he probably went off about me or the 'Number Seven' as much as he wanted during battle."

"Ah, that he did, that he did. I have records of the conversation. I'll play them."

Machine Ilis crystal responded with a carefree voice.

"We of 'Heaven's Wheel' are a secret military organization stationed at the various centers of the Governmental Sector. We are permitted to use military force regardless of the place and we are named after the weapons entrusted to us."

"By the weapons entrusted to you……so you mean that you're the 'number one' not because you defend this place alone but because you use a single mace?"

"Yes. The 'number seven' and 'number nine' also have a fitting amount of weapons to complement their names ——……"

"By the way, the second one was Sheltis speaking."

"……That idiot, he really said whatever he wanted."

The Number Nine sighed gloomily because of Machine Ilis crystal' playback. Kuro who was idling beside him also seemed to be at a loss for words.

"Pheeew. For the time being, let's just trust that there's a member called 'Number Nine' in the organization ' Heaven's Wheel'. ……Can we continue this conversation ?"

"It's a counterattack."

"A counterattack?"

"Right. But you know, I came with the intention of having a conversation of equals between Tenketsu Palace and the Governmental Sector. So can I cut these restraints already?"

Sophia

Flop……the ropes which were fastened firmly all along from his shoulders to his ankles displayed sharp cuts and fell to the ground.

"Oh!"

Ran, who had been reclining in her chair, had her eyes shining. ……How did he cut them? There wasn't even a slight noise or indication nor a presence.

"Amazing, amazing! How'd you do that? One more time!"

"Fufun. Well, isn't that amazing? This is my——buhaa !?"

Huick fainted in agony after having an elbow slammed into his lower flank.

"Huick-sama, please take a short rest. The conversation won't proceed so I shall speak."

Standing courteously, Kuro bowed politely.

"Previously, at the conference that we had Priestess Ymy-sama attend, there was an incident involving Maha and Igneed of the Lords of Unusual Books. At that time, we caused a great deal of trouble for you."

"Ah, n-no……that's not true."

Ymy frantically waved her hand and Kuro bowed deeply once more.

"And for Tenketsu (Sophia) Palace, exactly one month ago. A Guard unit was wiped out by Maha of the Lords of Unusual Books. That case itself was resolved by Sheltis-sama and Kagura-sama over there but……is that so? A true conclusion has yet to be reached. The reason being that not a single thing about the Lords of Unusual Books' identity or goal has been understood."

——Isn't that so?

Kuro gazed at Meimel with a smile and challenging look.

Right beside here, Huick shrugged while still seated in the chair.

"The Governmental Sector will be counterattacking from now on. We'll be entering the one base that Kuro and I found."

"I seeee. You want Tenketsu Palace (Sophia) to join in on that."

"The Governmental Sector was attacked and you guys also had subordinates crushed by them. With that, wouldn't it be good to cooperate?"

"……That's riiight. Before that, anybody who wants to pose a question should do so."

Is there anyone? Meimel looked around her and nobody there raised a voice in response.

……No, there should be questions.

……Everybody should have at least one doubt at the very least.

"Everyone's so reserved, huuuh. Well then——"

"Just one thing."

Amongst those who were keeping silent, Sheltis timidly opened his mouth.

"Is anything fine?"

"That's right, good on you, nii-chan. It's important to be curious."

The look in Huick's eyes changed as he propped his elbows up on the table. Kuro who was sitting still beside him also stared with her blue eyes narrowed to slits.

……This is.

……As I thought. They came with the intention of letting us ask questions from the beginning.

'Questioning' was, so to speak, a measure of the asker's ability to gather information and their ability to process information.

Depending on what question the Priestesses, Sennenshi or Guards here were to pose, they would gain a rough idea of Tenketsu Palace's analytic ability.
Sophia

……You could call these two examiners.

……They've come to determine whether Tenketsu Palace (Sophia) can become a reliable ally or not.

That was why they showed up boldly while prepared for the dangers.

If they were to ask a question which ran counter to the Governmental Sector's expectations, they would be regarded as having no information gathering ability and would be provided no beneficial information to oppose the Lords of Unusual Books.

"That's good, nii-chan, that look isn't bad at all. You understand."

"——Huick-sama. You're saying a little too much."

"Kuro, these guys understand. There's no point in tediously hiding our objective from people who understand."

Now, what question will you ask me? You've already ascertained there's no reason to hide anything, the ' Number Nine's' daring gaze clearly conveyed that.

"What I want to know is your information source."

"Hou?"

"_____"

Huick and Kuro widened their eyes slightly.

"First. The fact that Kagura and I fought 'Golden Maha ' has not been announced outside of the tower. ……The second is the Lords of Unusual Books' base. How did you find a base that even Tenketsu Palace (Sophia) hasn't found yet? We haven't received an explanation for either yet."

"……How unpleasant, you noticed that."

After a very long silence, that was what the secret operative muttered.

"You're pretty good even though you're young. Ah, I' m still in my twenties myself. Well, if we're talking age, Kuro over here——"

"Huick-sama."

"……Right, let's continue the conversation. I'll start off by saying the question's not bad."

Resting his chin on his hands, the man from ‘Heaven’s Wheel‘ pointed at his own eyelid.

“It’s the eye. You should understand if I say Mikuva’s Crimson Eye. As for your question, we can figure out either one of those by using it.”

“Oya, but you shouldn’t be able to use that without a compatible individual?“

“Correct. That’s why this person’s here.”

Huick pointed with his chin at the suited woman directly behind him.

“There are currently a total of three people compatible with Mikuva’s Crimson Eye in the Governmental Sector. Kuro is one of them. Though I say compatible, that doesn ’t mean fully compatible, so there is a limit on the information able to be drawn out but……well, she can at least get information of that level. I think that’s good enough of an answer.”

“Is that enough?“

“……Yeah.”

This man who named himself as Huick was a trickster. Complete opposite the 'Number One', he would plan with one or two layers of his opponent's thoughts in mind.

"And your response is?"

"Let's seeee. You said it was a counterattack but it sounds more like an infiltration, so it'll be a select few elite, right? The opponents being who they are, Regular Guards aren't going to cut it……and there are few amongst the Elite Guards who are privy to the circumstances. Ahh, what are we to do; with things being the way they are, we have no choice but to send someone from those gathered heeere."

Meimel crossed her arms underneath her chest and pressed a finger against her own cheek. That expression was like an expert enjoying themselves in an intellectual game.

"One or two people?"

"No way. We don't know the enemy organization's scale, so it's logical to have more allies. ……Well, there are only two from the Governmental Sector so we can't ask for dozens of people. If you're looking to cooperate,

we'd like around two. In reality, the limit for those who will be able to infiltrate in one go is four including Kuro and I. More than that would be a separate unit."

"By the way, what's the maximum?"

"If you don't trust us, you can prepare as many as you want."

Meimel asked with a smile and the Number Nine spread his hands.

"But I'll pass on a big family; at most, it will be five people. That is to say, you pick five and that'll be seven when Kuro and I are added. In that case, two from your five would come with us as the main unit and the remaining three will infiltrate using a separate route."

"Fumu, fumu. So two will be travelling with you and more than that is a different unit. ——This is a difficult problem, hmmmm."

Contrary to her words, the Priestess' tone was that of enjoyment when she answered.

"Ran."

"Where are Viola Nova and Horn Nova?"

"They're on standby on the floor above."

"Thanks. That means that with the nine here and the Nova sisters, we have eleven. Syun-rei is really busy with the barrier in place of Salah-sama so she's excluded. Up to five of us can go……oh dear, how troublinggg, who shall we choose from amongst these wonderful members ?"

Meimel gazed into thin air with a teasing smile.

……The infiltration of the third organization. The most that can go is five.

"_____"

Looking around at those gathered again, Sheltis gulped.

First, there were three Priestesses. Meimel, Ymy and Viola who was waiting on another floor.

Likewise, there were three Sennenshi. Ran, Leon and Horn on another floor. In addition was the Cadres Guard , Ishtar. All of them were able individuals included in the superior part of the tower's strongest.

……Adding in the four from our unit makes eleven people.

……Five will be chosen from here to head for the Lords of Unusual Books' base.

"If you want to know, chase after me. Now, Sheltis, chase after me. That is the beginning of everything."

……I want to be chosen to go.

Igun'I's true intention. In the first place, why the Lords of Unusual Books had an abnormal knowledge of Mikuva's Crimson Eye and the Forbidden Crystal was still a mystery.

……And above all, they know that I have mateki.

A single premonition weighed on his chest.

They freely operated Mikuva's Crimson Eye which can 't be used without a compatible individual and……they knew that I fell into the Garden of Corrupted Eden Song.

If it's Igun'I, does he also know how to purify the mateki residing in this body?

"_____"

There was what happened in the Governmental Sector but he had thought so ever since he thought the information of the Governmental Sector's cultured Yuugenshu was related to him and Ymy. Now that he knew all of that was the secret maneuvering of the third organization, he wasn't going to let this suggestion from the Governmental Sector slip past.

……Ymy, I thought your purification of that mateki which no Priestess could purify was truly amazing.

……You really are doing your best. For all those of the tower.

Then me too.

No matter how dangerous this infiltration mission may be, if it's connected to Ymy and my sakes——

"Now then, has everyone decided on how they feel?"

Meimel pulled out a large notebook from who-knows-where.

"Of course, I will be making the final decision but first I'll hear you out if you have a request. Those who wish to participate in the joint plan with the Governmental Sector, name yourself and step forward."

While spinning the pen skillfully around her finger, she looked over the assembled members.

"……Oh my, nobody?"

Nobody reacted.

Meimel stared in wonder at the silent Tenketsu (Sophia) Palace members.

"That's unexpected, hmmmm, or are you just holding back? Then I'll just decide it myself, and I suppose that'll be fine. Well then——"

"……If I"

From his throat which was parched from nervousness, he squeezed out his voice.

Tenketsu Palace (Sophia)'s members. And the two secret organization members focused their sights —— Sheltis gulped deeply.

"If I would do, please let me participate."

Part 3

"Those who wish to participate, please name yourself and step forward."

Easily over ten metres away from the meeting room, in the shadow of an intersection, Eyriey had her eyes firmly closed and was listening to the conversation.

……Amaaazing.

……So this is telepathy.

The conversation happening within the locked meeting room was directly echoing in her head. Given that she was a common civilian, she obviously couldn't use shinryoku spells. The one using spells to listen to other peoples' conversations with telepathy and even allowing a third party like herself to listen in was——

"……"

The girl with hair the color of reflective water was only staring fixedly in the direction of the meeting room.

"Eyriey, did you hear the conversation?"

"Perfectly. That's Shasa for you, amazing! Wouldn't you prefer being an apprentice Priestess?"

"……That would also be nice."

The girl nodded with a smile which didn't let on as to whether she was serious or joking.

"Rather than that, Eyriey, aren't you interested in that infiltration talk from just now?"

"Yeah, yeah! I heard Sheltis' voice so I wonder if he's going somewhere a—gain. Even though that means we won't get to play."

It would be fine if it was an expedition to the Nature District or the Biotope. But if it was like the times with the Governmental Sector or the floating archipelago (Lagoon), then Yuto and Eyriey herself would be lonely.

"Then let's go."

"Eh?"

"Eyriey, please participate in what that Huick person was talking about as well. No matter the case, it concerns Tenketsu Palace (Sophia) so I'm also interested."

"……Eh-ehhhhhhhh! Wh-What does that mean!? You're telling a civilian like me to name myself in there!? "

"As an airship maintenance worker or something else, there are any number of ways to sneak yourself in."

"Eh. W-Well……I like those kinds of things but it didn 't seem like their positions or the atmosphere would

permit something like that? It was a ridiculously serious talk."

"It's fine. I'll do something about that. Also"

In a rare act, the girl balled a fist tightly and winked.

"You need not worry about your physical wellbeing. I will have a reassuring partner travel together with you."

"Ohhh, a partner!?"

To warrant being called reassuring, he or she must be quite reliable. Who would that be? A Sennenshi? Or Sheltis? No, no, there's also the possibility it's somebody strong who hasn't been recognized yet.

While she was occupied with that.

"I'm counting on you, Yuto."

"O—kay! I'll be going with Eyri-nee!"

"So there you have it, Eyriey, please take Yuto along with you."

"Yuto will do her best—"

"……"

In comparison with the merry young girl and Shasa who was smiling as well. Eyriey muttered with a sigh.

"……It's not like me, but I'm worried."

Part 4

Meeting room 269-F.

"Houhou, I seeee."

A lone Governmental Sector secret organization executive shook their shoulders in pleasure.

"What's this, if one person speaks out……was everyone just checking how those around them would act? However, this is too many people. Now then, let's have the promised selection."

"_____"

His subordinate who corrected her posture was standing still silently. With her mouth drawn to a line,

the silent woman was looking sidelong at Tenketsu Palace's Priestess. Sophia

"Fumu, fumu, we're a little over five people. What to dooo, there are those I want to have go within those who haven't named themselves as well……well, let's separate this and that. Okay, this will dooo!"

Meimel shut her notepad and nodded in satisfaction.

"Already done?"

"Yes, I've already decided. We can't have our Governmental Sector guests waiting either."

Answering Ran's question with a wink, the Priestess who managed the tower brushed aside her own bangs. With flowing movements, she pointed to the door directly behind her.

"Well then, I'll announce those chosen to participate in the joint plan with the Governmental Sector."

Then.

"Only those whose names are called, please remain in this room."

In tandem with Meimel's proclamation——

The meeting room was wrapped in a quiet tension.

Afterword

Thank you for taking this book into your hands, I'm Sazane Kei.

It's sudden but the afterword this time is three pages. While I was writing the afterword, I thought to myself that this much of an afterword will basically be suitable for Sazane.

It's a problem if there are too many pages and it's difficult to summarize the contents if there are too few pages. With three pages, while talking about recent happenings, I can end off with "Is it just a bit short?" This "Is it just a bit short?" barrier is a point like when eating or playing where you would go "Just a little more! " and stop to enjoy the next time, which I believe is a good time.

——Let's put that aside. Now onto a little about the volume.

About the contents of the all-important 'Eden 6', the first thing is to read it. Pretty much all allies are present

and Ymy also begins to get involved in the main crux of the story; I would be happy if you came to see and feel the full picture of the world little by little.

Next volume, finally we'll be charging into the enemy camp(?) or maybe it should be said that all the allies up to now will get wrapped up in a climax of the story. Please look forward to it.

A Few Present Happenings ~Accelerating Sleeping Time~

My usual super early lifestyle continues.

From my 'three in the morning' daily start which began half a year ago, it has slowly moved to 'half past two in the morning' and as I've gotten used to that, I'm planning to challenge waking up at 'two in the morning'. If I keep getting earlier like this, around next year, I may or may not end up waking up at 'late at night, midnight'.

Eh? What do I do when waking up so early?

That would be my manuscr……which also gets done occasionally, and I read books or search for materials

online. I'd also like to introduce things that are like "I'm going to do this!" but this is pretty difficult, organizing afterword pages……

Thanks

To my editor, K-san, who always gives me precise advice and my illustrator, Kasukabe Akira, who draws beautiful illustrations, thank you very much!

And all those supporting 'Eden', I'm counting on you from now on as well!

Next Volume Preview

I shall tell you everything. All you wish to know and all you wish not to know, all of it together.

……That is why I am here after all.

Meimel's selected unit from Tenketsu Palace <Sophia>
.

Along with the Number Nine <Huick>'s group, they await their infiltration into the third organization's base and those who are waiting to receive them also quietly await that time. Those selected for the unit and those who wish for their return on the floating continent < Orbie Clar>. A great many expectations intertwine complexly, then.

Everything distorts with Igun'I's baptism———

Well then, let us meet again in 'Hyouketsu Kyoukai no Eden 7 Blank Baptism'.

Last third of January, 2011 http://members2.jcom.home.ne.jp/0445901901/ Sazane Kei

Translator's Notes and References

1. ↑ [T/N: You can think of these as mountainous versions of sakura trees. I didn't wanna mix two languages for it and call it mountain sakura. The tree is called Prunus donarium by genus and species .]
2. ↑ [T/N: I guess this has to be clarified now. 修 is used for the Priestesses and it's the religious type of practice (or for arts) and the Sennenshi have which is the more militaristic training.]
3. ↑ [T/N: I get the feeling this is called a revolver but whatever.]
4. ↑ [T/N: The variation of "elder sister" she uses here is "ane-ue". If you'd like it in the original form from now on, comment below.]
5. ↑ [T/N: I've decided now that any time somebody stretches out a word, I'm gonna triple one of the letters.]
6. ↑ [T/N: This is really hard to put into English because the furigana says "blank" when there's more variation. The first part is 空 (blank space). The second one is which is the wasei-eigo (Japanese-style English) form of the word blank,

pronounced buranku. Third part is which means " empty" like an empty room. The last little bit is which is the kanji for Igun-I's name.]

7. ↑ [T/N: I'm dropping adding -sama to English words unless it's a name. I feel like it sounds retarded...]
8. ↑ [T/N: I looked over this and it was ノ previously. Here it's . Which is the correct one? I have no idea.]